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20 BIGGEST BREAKOUT GAMES

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Discover the story behind Capcom's riskiest ever reboot

KOJIMA ON THE FUTURE
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FORZA HORIZON 3
How does cross-platform multiplayer stack up?

THE RPG MASTER
Chris Avellone speaks candidly about his career

Pokémon fever has returned, and while I was always keen to see how *Pokémon Go* would be received and assumed that the usually rabid fanbase would flock to it, I couldn't have dreamed it would be to this extent.

Pokémon Go is a true gaming phenomenon, and like many such phenomena in recent years, it sits in that gap where you might even feel you could question whether it is really a game at all. It lacks many features and functions of classic Pokémon titles, but at its core it has the most important element, the one that made so many of us fall in love with the series from the start – it makes you want to find and collect Pokémon.

All the other bells and whistles of augmented reality, Gyms, Pokestops and so on are fine, but, what is powering this new wave of Pokémon love, to my mind, is that exact same passion for collecting and hunting that made the original Game Boy games and trading cards so desirable.

That we can now explore our own towns and cities looking for the pocket monsters only turns it into a new variety of beguiling.

Jon Gordon

Jonathan Gordon
EDITOR




HABERDASHER


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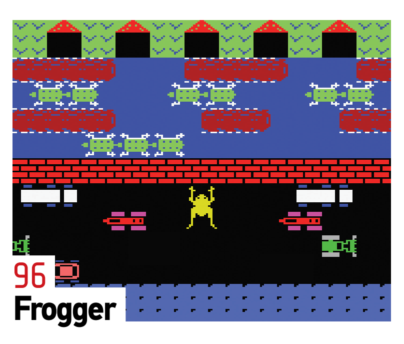


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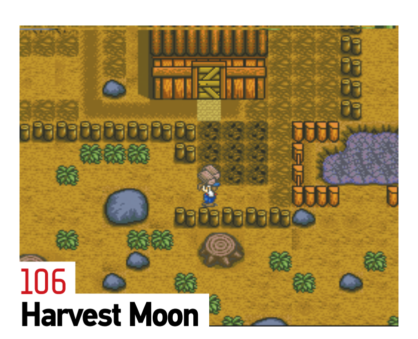

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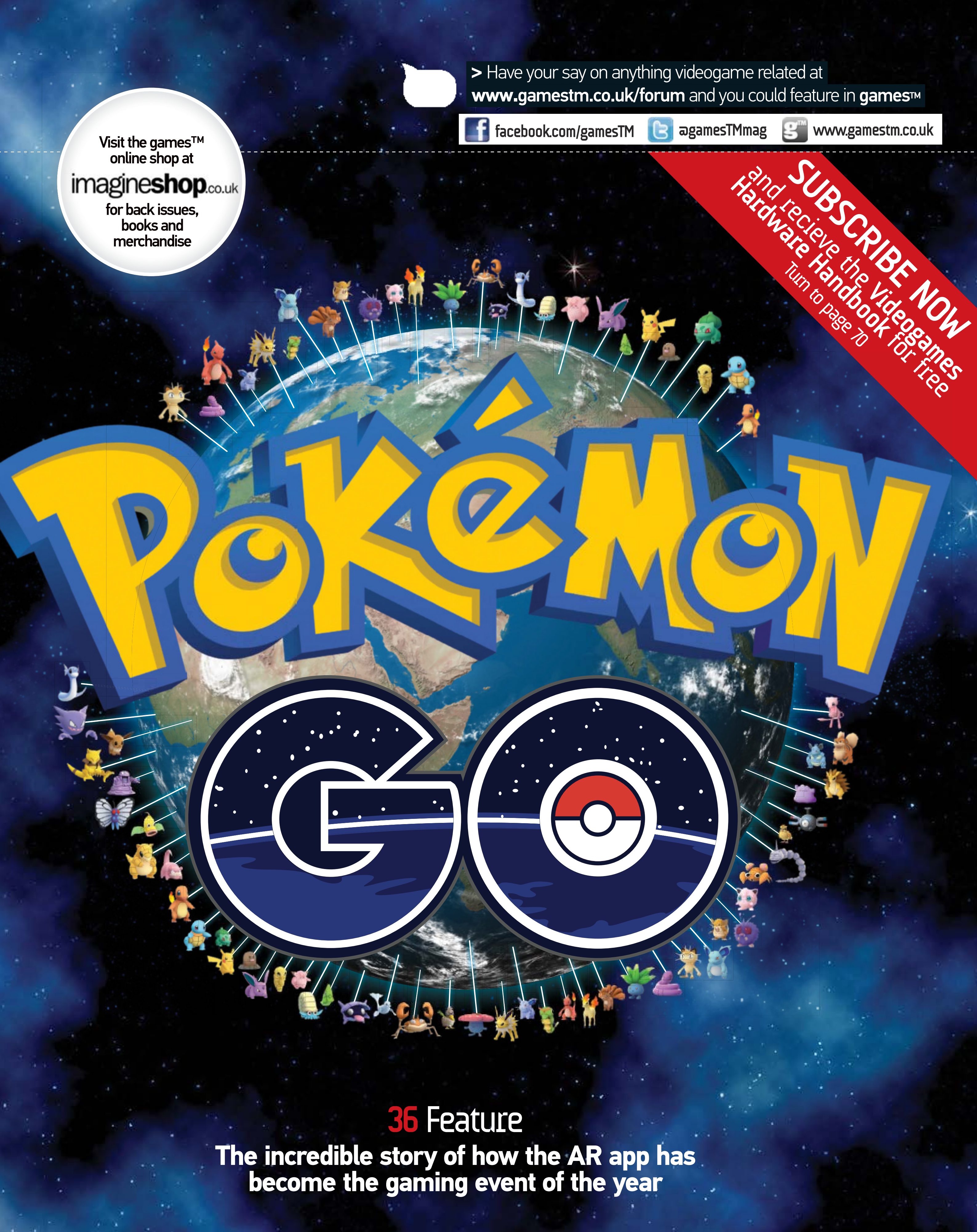
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INDIE ACTION

Kojima on the future

→ How can the limitations of the past influence the creation of a better tomorrow?



Famed video game designer Hideo Kojima sat down with Mark Cerny to discuss 30 years of evolution in the industry and the staggering ambition behind the Metal Gear creator's latest project, *Death Stranding*.

There isn't another entertainment medium on the planet that has undergone such rapid transformation as that of the video game industry. Thanks to huge advancements in technology over the last three decades, gaming has undergone something of an evolution. In almost every area of design and execution, developers are free to create – bound only by their imaginations.

At Develop 2016, we were able to see two legends of the industry engaged in conversation. The first was the PlayStation 4's lead architect Mark Cerny, responsible for driving technological innovation forward during his time in the industry. The other, Metal Gear creator Hideo Kojima, a developer who has been key in evolving game mechanics and narrative design in the medium since the dawn of 8-bit gaming. The two have been colleagues and friends through much of their three decades in the industry, though 2016 marks the first time the pair has directly collaborated on a project - *Death Stranding*.

"I had many offers," considered Kojima at Develop Conference 2016. "I was fortunate in that many people made me offers to work with them. But I decided to work with Sony because of the trust that I have in our relationship, as well as the trust that they put in me. So I thought, I'm confident that working with Sony is the best chance of making a very successful, as good of a game as people expect, in the shortest amount of time. I'm confident that working with Sony is something the fans and players will agree to."

DATA STREAM → NINTENDO HAS ANNOUNCED AN ALL-IN-ONE NES MINI FOR 11 NOVEMBER 2016

Inset PlayStation 4 exclusive, *Death Stranding*, will be Hideo Kojima's first game developed outside of Konami, following the completion of *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain*.

It shouldn't come as a surprise to anyone to hear Kojima speak so lovingly about his relationship with Sony. The PlayStation essentially enabled the developer to build the games that he had always imagined, starting with *Metal Gear Solid* back in 1998.

When it came to *Death Stranding*, his upcoming PlayStation 4 exclusive, it seemed like a natural fit – especially as working with Cerny, who acted as technical producer on the title's reveal trailer, would prove himself to be the magic ingredient.

"I've known Mark for a long time and we have been talking about doing something together while eating and having conversations," Kojima chuckled. "Now that we are working with Sony and PlayStation, Mark is the one that is making the PlayStation hardware… so having Mark will just boost [the game]. It will be the one element, the chemical reaction, that will make our capabilities much bigger."

To get a sense of where Kojima is heading on his first adventure outside of Konami, you need to look to the past. Because, unless you're a retro gaming aficionado, it's difficult to really appreciate how hard developers had it back in the day. As Kojima will tell you, even the simple act of telling a story was limited to on-screen text and the occasional "beep" for voice acting – a world away from the huge motion-capture and recording studios now required (and in Kojima's case, desired) to create a triple-A gaming experience.

> "It's getting closer and closer to me being able to make what I imagine"

"[Compared to 30 years ago], it has completely changed. The characters, you could only express them through thoughts – their voices were only beeps. They were very different to what they are nowadays. We had so many limitations, it was hard to tell a story [in games]. It was sort of like chess or playing cards, where you set some rules and from there you try to simulate something. 30 years later, there is so much that we can do with the characters. We can add music and movies, the world can be three-dimensional and we can even add cultural and ethnic background to the story."

Cerny, who was leading the discussion, pitched an interesting thought. After the pair discussed how the power of PlayStation had opened up the ability to use 3D polygons in real-time, which led to the creation of *Metal Gear Solid*, he asked Kojima whether the constant, rapid advance in technology affected the way he approaches game design today? As Cerny put it, "I believe we put more processing power into computing one pixel today than we would an entire frame back in the day. Has the gameplay that you are able to create evolved as well?" That's almost an impossible consideration. Of course it would alter the way a developer approaches game creation, *right*?

"There are certainly aspects like that, where technology has changed what I wanted to do. But when I think about a game in my head, it has so many elements. [I can] smell things, things have their own temperature, it's quite a vast reality that I'm imagining," says Kojima, who gives us a window into the wild


ROCKET LEAGUE CROSS-CONSOLE PLAY IS READY PENDING SONY'S APPROVAL, SAYS PSYONIX

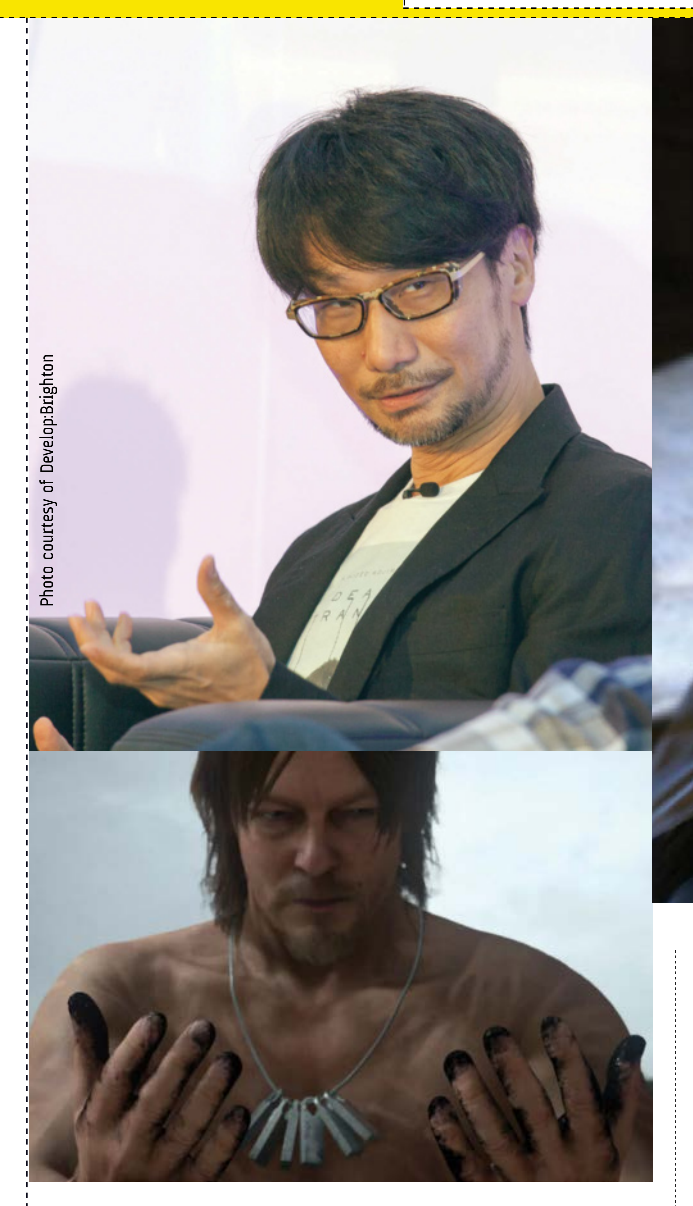



Photo courtesy of Develop:Brighton

Above Kojima Productions is still searching for a game engine to build *Death Stranding* on, and the famed developer won't budge on the options he has available to him.

Inset Sony has inadvertently helped Kojima build his career. He was just about ready to give up the Metal Gear franchise before he saw the power of the original PlayStation, it encouraged him to create *Metal Gear Solid* in 1998.

> "Now we can tell the kinds of stories that you can in movies. 30 years ago it was very different, but still I'm very happy that I chose this road"

ambition that drives his projects. "From there I start to figure out what I can put into a game with the current technology, what will I be able to do with the technology that's available in a few years? That, for me, is game creation. It's getting closer to me being able to make what I imagine. So even if things keep advancing, it's only getting closer to what I can imagine. That's why I could never stop making games."

There had been some speculation, following the completion of *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain*, that Kojima would leave gaming and build a career in cinema. He has never kept his love and admiration of film a secret, nor his desire as a young creator to get involved in that particular industry. But for Kojima, gaming has evolved to the point where he can realise all of his ambitions. He has no desire to leave because the future is so rich with possibilities. "Now we can tell the same kinds of stories that you can in movies. 30 years ago it was very different, but still I'm very happy that I chose this road - everything I wanted to do in movies I can now do in games. I'm very satisfied with this choice."

And it's true, you only have to look towards the quality of product coming from studios like Naughty Dog - with the cinematic expertise delivered in titles such as *The Last Of Us* and *Uncharted 4* - to see that gaming can now deliver narratives and action with the same quality as a Hollywood production. Though Kojima believes that we are only just scratching the surface, that gaming will soon be able to deliver experiences that trump that of direct interaction between humans.

"Direct contact, between one real human being to another, it's kind of hard to convey some of those emotions [in a game]," he says, noting that the ability to deliver better facial animations through motion capture and animation has brought a human element to games that wasn't previously possible. "I think it will come to a point where it will be easier to reach out emotionally through games, through online, than it will be through actual interaction between human beings. We are really getting close to that point where it will be easier to convey emotions through games than actual people."

In many respects, that's a terrifying thought. The notion that video games may foster stronger connections between people than actual conversation. But we see where he is coming from, the interactive element of a video game – combined with the uncanny photorealism technology now possible – could indeed mean that we find it easier to connect with one another through a safe (and entertaining) virtual space in the future. The first step on the road to such a realisation, Kojima believes, is almost certainly the release of commercial virtual-reality headsets.

DATA STREAM → THE SYSTEM SHOCK REBOOT HAS BEEN CONFIRMED FOR PS4, ARRIVING EARLY 2018

Inset The teaser for *Death Stranding* has left us with a lot of questions, but we are very interested to see more.

"I think VR has the opportunity to change, not only games, but life; entertainment, education and even restaurants. More than 100 years ago movies appeared in landscape [format] and now we're watching them on smartphones, and yet they are still tied to this square frame. With VR we are able to get rid of that little frame and we are able to look in 360 degrees, it will make a huge difference and allow many things to change. Once these VR devices make their way into people's homes they will stay there. People will keep thinking of new ideas using this technology and it will change so many aspects of life. Of all of these changes I expect to happen, I want to focus on the changes it can make to entertainment."

Hideo Kojima has always been a force for change. He has embraced the advancement of technology and the opportunities at hand to create new and long-lasting experiences. He's a futurist, somebody with a hunger to constantly set the benchmark for success higher and higher. Now he is free of Konami, expect Kojima to work without restriction. *Death Stranding* may be shrouded in mystery, but it's fuelled by a desire to innovate and experiment with the technology at hand. Kojima has never strived to deliver less, why would he start now?

How is production on Death Stranding?

→ How close is Hideo Kojima's latest to release?

Of Hideo Kojima's first game post-Konami, we've actually got very little information. The teaser trailer ended up asking more questions than it gave answers, but then that's no surprise, the developer has always been a master of misdirection.

Despite Kojima and Cerny engaging on a world tour to visit studios and hunt for the right technology to build this project, he is still yet to settle on a game engine - though it looks as if Norman Reedus is in for the long haul, *The Walking Dead* actor looking in fine form with his photorealistic reproduction at E3 2016.

"Right now we're choosing an engine. We should have a decision soon," admitted Kojima. "We're making many experiments, this new title that we are making has many unique aspects – some can't be fully conveyed in a design document. So we're making several experiments. The teaser that we released was, in a way, an experiment for the visuals. In parallel, we are making experiments of different gaming elements and what not. We are almost through with this, and we should be entering full production soon."

While Kojima has confirmed that the elements that we have seen in *Death Stranding* will indeed make it into the full, final release, that doesn't really tell us anything new about the game. It's shrouded in mystery. But you can't feign genuine enthusiasm, and that's what we see from Kojima and Cerny when they speak about the future and what it means for video games. We now have the technology to hand to create complex stories that work alongside experiences designed to push mechanical and systemic convention. And that's what we expect to see from *Death Stranding*, a game that will not only be decidedly strange – the reveal trailer with its disappearing babies, beached whales and floating apparitions says as much – but also, quite possibly, divisively forward thinking.

Considering Kojima has already admitted his love of virtual reality, we wouldn't be surprised to see VR support proving to be an important part of the project; though for now all we can do is speculate. But that's part of the joy of getting excited about Kojima unchained, he's a developer that has no qualms in surprising players - *Death Stranding* could become literally anything. For now, it's likely we won't see much more of the game until E3 2017. The debut teaser was created in ten weeks, so we're very excited to see what Kojima Productions is able to do in the next ten months.



SUDA51'S THE SILVER CASE IS FINALLY GETTING A WESTERN RELEASE ON STEAM AND PLAYISM







"We don't talk about indie anymore"

→ ID@Xbox Europe head Agostino Simonetta reflects on the evolving role of independent developers

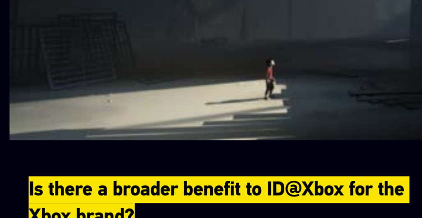


After three years of ID@Xbox what are you most proud of?
I think the relationship we've built with the development community. It's fair to say that three years ago the relationship wasn't the same as it is today and I think we managed to show the community that we mean business and we're serious about ID@Xbox. We keep expanding, we keep using resources to do things with ID and we're not moving away from it.

Quite often people are praising us on Twitter; there are some people who are complaining about us on Twitter and that's fine. It's just that constant dialogue. I mean, I have a lot of air miles as you can imagine. We travel to as many events as possible because the feeling is that, if you close yourself in your office and you don't really meet people, after a while the program will stagnate.

Do you feel the idea of what an indie game is has been blurring?
We actually don't talk about indie anymore. We stopped internally. I think Chris [Charla, director of ID@Xbox] said in the office, we don't use it anymore. The term had its moment. We talk about independent developers now, which gives a different connotation. Indie sometimes has a negative connotation, or started to have. I think independent developer or digital publisher describes better the job that those people have to do. Back in 2000 we didn't have to worry about PR, marketing, sales – we were developers. Someone like Joe [Brammer, Senior Game Producer at Bulkhead Interactive] is a digital publisher and part of that is developing the game, but most of the work is actually PR, marketing, sales and lifecycle management.

What goals do you still have for ID@Xbox?
This is not something that we are doing for just a few years. This is a long journey without an end. The important thing is that we keep evolving and adapting the program. Keeping it fresh and keeping it in line with what the developers need from us, as well as what the gamers need from us. That's also one of the drivers for why we travel so much and meet so many people. You need to keep evolving because the needs of a platform or a system today are very different from what they were three years ago. Xbox Game Preview was not just for ID@Xbox, but we're seeing the ID developers embracing that model first. We're seeing a lot of titles going in and out and be very successful commercially or critically. That's our goal, to keep listening, to never stop listening, keep evolving in line with what we need and mostly what developers and players need.



Is there a broader benefit to ID@Xbox for the Xbox brand?
Obviously we are a store so we are selling content, but that's a de facto situation. I think we're seeing a lot of innovation and a lot of excitement for the products coming to the platform. A lot of new ideas and a lot of left-field ideas sometimes. I think gamers like new experiences. We say everything is changing, every six months things are different, but there are three things that gamers always want: they want novelty, gameplay and story. Not necessarily all three of them at the same time, but I think that the ID program has brought a lot of those new experiences of great gameplay and great stories, and I think that's what we as gamers all want. We want to be entertained. I think the program so far has done a great job of enabling developers to bring their great ideas.

DATA STREAM → XBOX ONE BACKWARDS COMPATIBILITY FOR RED DEAD SAW SALES JUMP 6,000 PER CENT


10



"It was one of the first games where physics really affected the gameplay; I had such fun with the gravity gun"

PAUL WEIR, SOUND DESIGNER & AUDIO DIRECTOR, HELLO GAMES

WHY I ♥...

HALF-LIFE 2

PAUL WEIR, SOUND DESIGNER & AUDIO DIRECTOR, HELLO GAMES

This might be a boring answer, but I love Half-Life 2*. It wasn't the first game that had physics, but it was one of the first where physics really affected the gameplay; I had such fun with the gravity gun.*

The whole branching narrative structure in it is, still now, incredible. The number of responses that the characters have based on your actions is just mind blowing. The quality of the sound design I was always very jealous of, and the scope, it was a massive game as well! Half-Life 2 *overshadows so much of the work that followed it… where is* Half-Life 3 *already?*

There are plenty of design options available to you, with all new body kits plus the advantages of just buying the best designs from the in-game auction house.





CHALLENGE ACCEPTED

The full customisation of blueprints to create your own ultimate racing challenge for friends will help you prove your might against the world. If you see yourself specialising in a specific race type or challenge, then it's time to see how you stack up against the rest of the drivers. Creating challenge blueprints are easy, plotting markers on a map. You'll get to test it yourself before publishing it, so you'll be able to tweak as you wish. How about designing a simple drag race that would work well for your latest custom tuning? Or how about the contest of hitting some sick air? All of these options are open to you once you get customising.

Above: Australia is best experienced with friends as four-player co-op makes its debut *Horizon 3*. Right: Contrary to popular belief, there is actually a weather system in Australia. It isn't just hot sun all the time. They also offer rain, drizzle and sometimes, maybe, you'll see a storm brewing. They do have some pretty good looking clouds though that add to the atmosphere in a very nice way.



Forza Horizon 3

CONCEPT ■ The excitable relation of the Forza franchise. Party hard and fast in some of the world's hottest cars under the Australian sun.

Sand, sun and searing rubber

F*orza Horizon* is a young, hip, brightly dressed maverick compared to the grey jacketed car enthusiast type that suits *Forza Motorsport*. *Horizon* is less about torque and differential lock, and more targeting the instant thrill of the race and the camaraderie of connecting with fellow racers online.

For many, it is seen as the fun racing game, and the speed at which this new one has come around speaks to Microsoft's enthusiasm as well. It's all about fast cars, big lights and plenty of music to indulge in while racing around some absolutely glorious locations.

Of course, *Forza Horizon 3* welcomes you to Australia and it's an open-world much larger than any of the Horizon titles before it. We've been reliably informed it's twice the size of *Forza Horizon 2*, which wasn't exactly tiny. What's more, there are even more environments to race through, varying in terrain type and offering a wide variety of challenges.

Playground made a smart move in picking Australia as its host for this Horizon event as it has much more to its colour pallet than brown canyons and yellow beaches. Prepare to race on tarmac, through jungles and of course, across sea fronts, all of which are looking insanely good. The ever popular Horizon showcase events return to give you a glimpse of how mad Australia can be. There are less roads this time out, with more of an emphasis on wild off-roading and honing your skills off the asphalt.

We were shown the intense detail that Playground Games has gone into capturing the skyscapes. The studio sent a bunch of the team to Australia for three months (it's a tough life) and they snapped away and filmed the glorious views of Australia in order to render them in even more detail for the final game. It may seem silly to bang on about clouds but it looks very lifelike. Plus it will run nicely with HDR on the new Xbox One S.

Among the sights of this world, you will be gazing at some beautiful motor vehicles too. The cover star and grandly named Lamborghini Centenario is easy on the eye, but even the average BMW's have the chance to be upgraded with the addition of popular body kit designers added to the game.

You can also fully customise the racing experience, creating your own events. Make challenges and races for your friends, share them to populate a leaderboard and, in due course, create even more rivalry amongst your mates. It doesn't begin and end with races either – you could also just set a challenge of who can hit the 'biggest air'.

If loneliness should kick in, meanwhile, you can team up with three additional racers, with four-player co-op making a debut – they can even be on their Windows 10 PC. Popular multiplayer game modes return but this is the first time you've been able to group up to take on the games numerous races. Even people with nice cars get lonely.

Another nice creative touch is that you can now host your radio station full of music tracks. The fan favourite stations do return, with more genres to boot, but a rather welcomed addition is the option to upload a bunch of your songs to OneDrive and have them pumped directly into your stereo. Alternatively, instead of banging tunes, there's nothing stopping you from listening to one of your favourite podcasts.

> "We have taken the Horizon festival to Australia. It's the largest, most diverse, most beautiful and most fun open-world we've ever built"
>
> RALPH FULTON, PLAYGROUND GAMES

When racing gets too much, you'll be thankful to hear that the Auction House is coming to *Horizon 3*. Create liveries, tuning setups and sell your cars on the digital marketplace. You can follow your favourite creators and publish your own to hopefully gain a following.

The thought of being able to share car tuning setups that are purpose built for taking on the coastline is highly appealing. But that's *Forza Horizon 3* all over.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: Xbox One, PC
Origin: UK
Publisher: Microsoft Game Studios
Developer: Playground Games
Release: 27 September 2016
Players: 1-4

Developer Profile

Playground Games has worked solely on the Forza franchise while booting its own spin-off of the series, *Forza Horizon*, in 2012. The UK-based developer is made up of industry veterans who have worked on other notable racing series such as the Colin McRae franchise and the F1 titles.

Developer History

Forza Horizon, **2012 [360]**
Forza Horizon 2, **2014 [Xbox One]**

High Point

Injecting fresh life and a new take on a popular racing game franchise. *Forza Horizon* introduced an all new audience to the world of Forza.





■ Above: Expect less road and more dirt in *Forza Horizon 3*. There's nothing wrong with tarmac but the off-road scene offers plenty more excitement and uncertainty. Everyone loves a wheelspin through dense foliage. Left: Water, mud, sand and foliage all some together to give you some really stunning locations to tear up with your tyres.

Dead Rising 4

CONCEPT ■ Original hero of the series, Frank West, heads back to the town where the zombie outbreak started, rebuilt for this new game.

Capcom Vancouver's Joe Nickolls chats about Frank's return

After a three year absence for the franchise – and a ten year absence for hero Frank West in a canonical game – *Dead Rising* is back in a big way. *Dead Rising 4* sees the photojournalist make his way back to the city that started it all, Willamette, Colorado, after one of his investigative journalist students gets a tip on some shady dealings there.

The return trip to Willamette brings a completely redesigned city and mall environment filled with both undead hordes and the weapons with which to dispose of them. We sat down with Joe Nickolls, the general manager of *DR4*'s development studio Capcom Vancouver, to talk about Frank's return trip to the series and what new kinds of toys the man who's covered wars will be playing with.

How excited are you to get back into *Dead Rising*?

Oh we've been waiting to out this game for so long, we've been working on it since right after *Dead Rising 3* and the *Super Ultra* expansion. We started working on it immediately and decided to bring Frank back.

What went into the decision to bring Frank back?

We really listened to what the fans wanted. We did a lot of user research and found that people love Frank. Frank is this weird character that resonates with people, he's cool because he isn't cool. We did a lot of focus group testing and results kept coming back: "We really like Frank."

We wanted to take a different approach to this game, we also wanted to go back to WIllamette because we wanted to get back into a mall, and so we thought 16 years after the original *Dead Rising*, let's go back to the mall. Frank is 54 years old now, let's bring him back, tough him up a little bit, and 'next-gen' him a little bit, and that's exactly what we did.

Is Frank aware of what happened in *Dead Rising 3*?

We're trying to be coy with the story right now, we're going to talk more about it in a couple of months so you'll have to stay tuned.

So, if you can tell us, why is Frank back in WIllamette?

Frank is a photojournalist, he's "covered wars you know," and Frank has a student who discovers something happening in Willamette and she convinces Frank to go check it out.

DR4 includes the mall and the city. Is it the same mall as the original?

This is a re-building of the mall as the first one was trashed in the first game. We've gone and modernised it, it's really big, and you'll probably be spending 50 per cent of your time in or under the mall and 50 per cent in the city. If there's a zombie outbreak I want to go to the mall, because that's where all the stuff is.

One major design choice we made in *Dead Rising* is instead of finding cheeseburgers randomly on the road you find them where they belong in the world. If I need an axe I'm going to go to the hardware store, or if I need medicine I go to the pharmacy, and we've tied *Dead Rising 4* to this. You'll see there's some cosplay going on and you can do that throughout the world, but all of the clothes are found in the washing machines at the laundromat.

Can we expect Seven Deadly Sins psychopaths of *Dead Rising 3*?

We went away from any psychopaths that are sexual deviants, as we got a lot of feedback that while people liked playing the game they didn't like the overt sexuality. They didn't feel like it belonged in the game. We wanted the new game to have enemies that fit into the overall world, and believe me there are some nutters in there and we'll be outing them in the coming months, but there's survivalists and military men and people taking advantage of other people in some really heinous ways.

> "We've been waiting to out this game for so long, we've been working on it since right after Dead Rising 3"
>
> JOE NICKOLLS, CAPCOM VANCOUVER

So we should expect enemies like the father and son sniper group in the original *Dead Rising*?

Yes, exactly. We didn't want to have any theme this time because, oddly enough, not a lot of people figured out that they were the seven deadly sins. Journalists figured it out because that's what you guys do, you discover patterns, but some people fought them and didn't know why they were even in the world. All the research suggested that while people wanted stuff like psychopaths in the game they wanted it to fit within the game's world, and we have a ton of stuff like that in there.



Details

Format: Xbox One (timed exclusive), PC, PS4
Origin: Canada
Publisher: Capcom
Developer: Capcom Vancouver
Release: 6 December 2016
Players: 1-2

Developer Profile

Capcom Vancouver started life as Blue Castle Games, its first game an arcade-style Major League Baseball game called *The Bigs*. After one sequel and the underwhelming MLB Front Office Manager, Capcom came knocking, giving the studio the keys to its open-world zombie epic *Dead Rising* and the rest is history.

Developer History

The Bigs **2007 [Xbox 360, PS3]**
Dead Rising 2 **2010 [Xbox 360, PS3]**
Dead Rising 2: Off The Record **2011 [Xbox 360, PS3]**
Dead Rising 3 **2013 [Xbox One]**

High Point

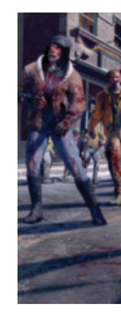
After a new take on Major League Baseball in *The Bigs* the former Blue Castle Games morphed into Capcom Vancouver, carrying *Dead Rising*'s franchise since the second game in 2010.



What can you tell us about new vehicles and the exo suit?

We looked at what people really liked with *Dead Rising*, and they loved comboing the weapons and the variety of the weapons. We've done lots of different combos before, so what were we going to do now? Instead of just comboing weapons, you can now combo yourself.

We gave you an exo suit that allows you to pull parking meters out of the ground and punch cars and use massive chainguns, but you can also combo the suit that you're in. We're not tipping our hat to the different combos, but Frank can modify the suit to do crazy stuff.



Are there different types of zombies now?

Yes, we have three different types of zombies in *Dead Rising* now. Everyone talks about innovation, and while we wanted to add new bosses we also wanted to do something with the 'cows' or the normal zombies throughout the world. First there's the horde or the zombies you're used to, then we have the 'newly infected' that resemble zombies from *28 Days Later* that run, never get tired because they don't breathe, and can climb up on a dumpster to get you when you think you're safe.

These newly infected can turn into what we call an 'evo', a zombie whose immune system is strong enough to turn an enemy into a zombie with a little bit of brain left. Think raptors from *Jurassic Park*: they're smart, they herd you and let the horde wear you down before attacking. They can jump 25 feet, they can hit telephone poles and send them down onto Frank, and they're super hard to kill.



Above: The new Willamette in *Dead Rising 4* provides Frank with vehicles as well as weapons, including a police car and a go-kart. Vehicles can be modded just as weapons can, giving players access to some crazy artillery against the horde. Below: Willamette again becomes the setting of *Dead Rising*, though now Frank will be fighting his way through more than just the mall.

THE EXO SUIT: FRANK WEST'S NEWEST OUTFIT

Imagine slipping on a piece of clothing that instantly increased your strength to superhuman levels. That's what the new Exo Suit can do for Frank in *Dead Rising 4*, turning him into a juggernaut of walking zombie death.

His newfound strength allows for some impressive abilities as he roams Willamette. First, he can pull parking meters right out of the ground with a clump of concrete still attached, turning it into a powerful melee weapon. He can also punch cars parked in the streets, sending them careening into a group of zombies for multiple kills. Finally, only in the Exo Suit can Frank wield the Minigun and turn himself into a harbinger of zombie reckoning with its flurry of bullets.



Frank dispatches a zombie by slicing it in half with a chainsaw, one of the many returning weapons in *Dead Rising 4*.

Injustice 2

CONCEPT ■ The heroes and villains of the DC universe are once again facing off, but this time there's an upgrade system

The gods just got a little nastier

Having done great things with *Mortal Kombat X*, NetherRealm appears to be attempting something similar with this most unlikely of fighting series. *Injustice: Gods Among Us* managed to pull off the bizarre concept of a fighter that involved Superman where he wasn't guaranteed to win. *Injustice 2* is building on that success with greater depth, more customisation and a truck-load of new characters.

The reason it worked the first time around though was because it was a lot of fun. It had narrative reasons to justify the conflict between Justice League heroes, but all that really mattered was that every signature move and ability was squeezed into the game. That's true of *Injustice 2* as well, only this time with even better graphics and some stunning new stage effects.

Environmental attacks and specials make a return of course, but we were very impressed with some of the contextual background effects in this game. For instance, fighting outside Gotham's famous Empire Theatre will eventually see spotlights focused on the combating duo. It's a simple little touch, but a sign of the level of detail NetherRealm is adding into this experience, really immersing itself in the DC lore and the worlds it inhabits.

GEARING UP

■ AS YOU PLAY through the story mode or online, you will unlock costume items and equipment specific to each character. These items will have effects on abilities, increasing strength, speed, defence, health and offering new moves. It also allows you to customise the look of each character to your preference, within the limits of what each one of them might typically wear. No top hats for Batman, unfortunately.

BANTER-RANG

■ MUCH LIKE *MORTAL Kombat X*, whichever characters you happen to be playing as will enter the stage with a few sharp barbs just to get things going. These contextual conversations mean that you'll get a little more story information and some insights into the relationship between fighters before they begin firing energy bolts and throwing fists into at each others faces. Classic adversaries (and friends) also appear to have special dialogue.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PS4, Xbox One
Origin: USA
Publisher: Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment
Developer: NetherRealm Studios
Release: TBC 2017
Players: 1-2

Developer Profile

The NetherRealm team is the current incarnation of the group that has been making Mortal Kombat from its earliest days. Since its rebranding as NetherRealm, it has begun to spin out from its core fighting series to experiment with other side-on fighting experiences like *Injustice*, *WWE* and *Batman*.

High Point

Mortal Kombat X has been a wonderful celebration of the series as well as an evolution of core mechanics. While new levels of complexity were added for hardcore fighters, the classic guts and gore were better than ever.

Developer History

Mortal Kombat **2011 [Multi]**
Injustice: Gods Among Us **2013 [Multi]**
WWE Immortals **2015 [iOS]**
Mortal Kombat X **2015 [Multi]**



ROSTER RUMOURS

SO FAR THE playable characters revealed have been Batman, Superman, Supergirl, Aquaman, Atrocitus, Wonder Woman, Blue Beetle and Gorilla Grodd. However, there are 28 characters believed to be coming at launch, and a T-shirt given away at an ESL event may reveal a few more. Logos and iconography for Harley Quinn, Captain Cold, Green Lantern and Doctor Fate all appear on the shirt – and that's before NetherRealm gets started on DLC.

"In Injustice 2, we are introducing new features that will change the way fans play fighting games"

ED BOON, NETHERREALM



Above: Everything is made to go bang. Scenes commonly feature some serious firepower that is going to bring the house down. Molotov cocktails and grenade launchers will really add bang to your arsenal, with plenty of destruction.

INFORMATION

Details

Format:
PC, PS4, Xbox One
Origin:
California, USA
Publisher:
2K Games
Developer:
Hangar 13
Release:
7 October 2016
Players:
1

Developer Profile

Hangar 13 was formed in December 2014 and is headed by ex-LucasArts game developer Haden Blackman. It has been working with 2K Czech to develop its first title, *Mafia III*.

Mafia III

CONCEPT 1960s USA has a dark Mafia underworld and it could all be yours. Lincoln Clay is going to have to crack some skulls to take it though

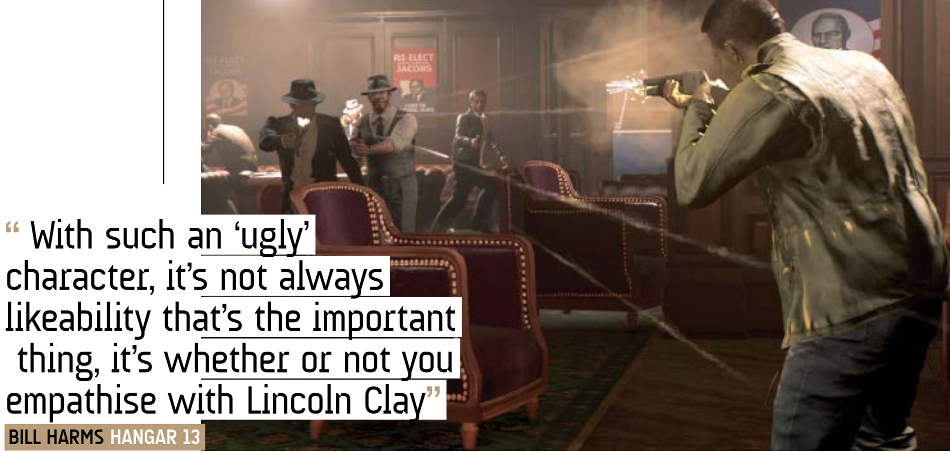
Being in the Mafia is bloody brutal

Hangar 13's re-imagined version of New Orleans is pretty grim – not only are there swamps filled with dead bodies, the streets are piling up with them too. The dark underworld of the Mafia is bubbling up to the surface, that's for sure. And then on top of that, our 'hero' is no saint either.

Lincoln Clay really isn't a typical 'wise guy', he's a flat-out criminal, and that's made us even more intrigued to know how the game's story is going to pan out. As we took a look at a brand new demo of the game, we were introduced to Lincoln as he was mid-way through jamming a knife into someone's neck. Scenes of Lincoln brutally bashing someone's skull against a desk or wall are pretty common. The period appropriate, but no less garish 1960s wallpaper doesn't look much better after we're done with it.

The back story is incredibly similar to that of Vito Scaletta (the main character from *Mafia II*) as a hero returning from war only to find his hometown greatly changed and under dark influences. Your job is to bring the entire city under your control and become the puppet master of local crime.

Below: Each district has a different feel – from the poor areas to the rich, from the swamps to the city streets.



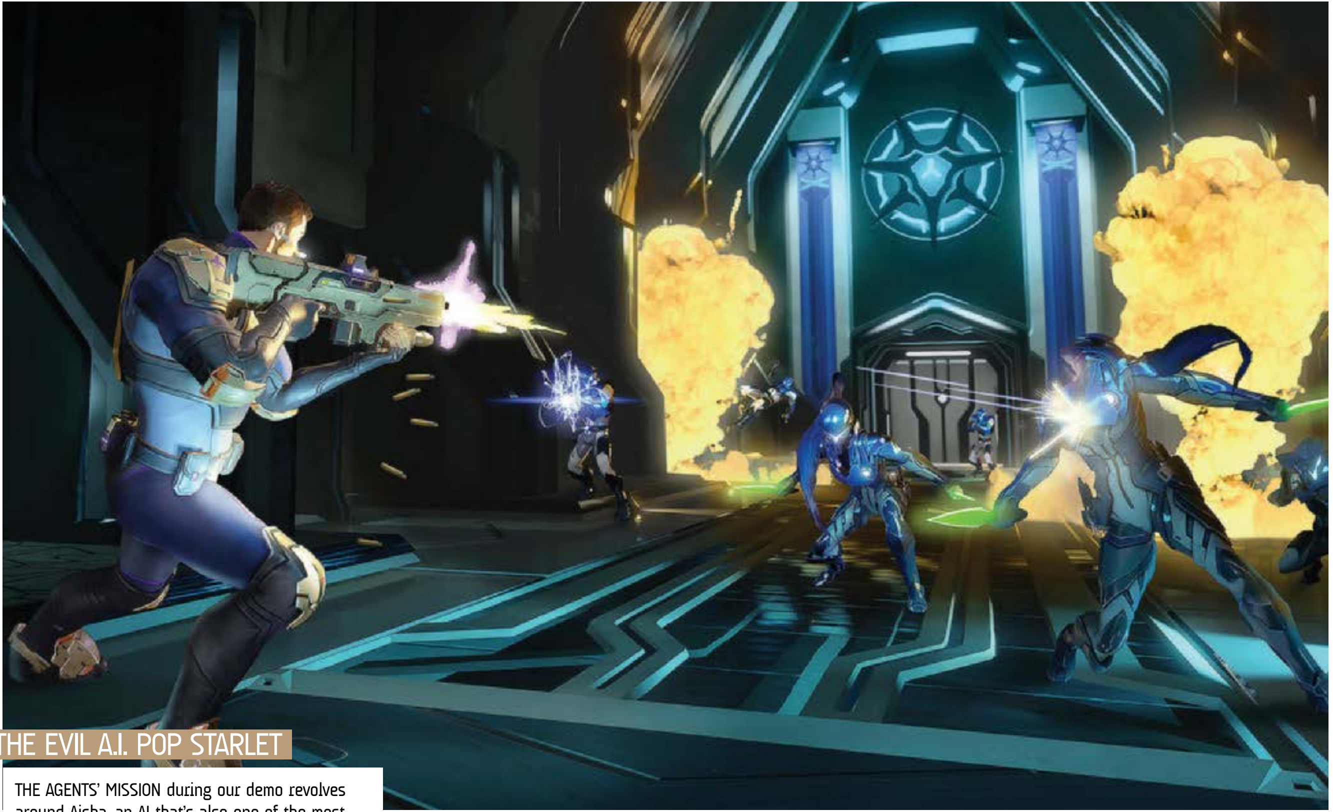
“ With such an 'ugly' character, it's not always likeability that's the important thing, it's whether or not you empathise with Lincoln Clay”
BILL HARMS HANGAR 13

Underbosses will act as your main henchmen – tasked with the job of looking after your land and improving specifics around the city. With each new district that you claim, you will get the choice of who you want to run it, with each underboss pitching they are worthy for the job. If you are purposely playing favourites, don't be too surprised when one of your underbosses stabs you in the back, triggering a possible twist in your game unique to yourself. And while this is all going on, other operating gangs will also be attempting to get back at you. Hangar 13 wanted to make it clear that in the live world of *Mafia III*, you can always be betrayed and overpowered.

Having different districts will give you perks and more power across the city. Call in a bunch of goons for back up if things are getting a little too hot to handle on the streets and they'll screech up in a typically fashionable motor vehicle and lay down covering fire.

Plenty of hours have been poured into getting this setting as accurate as possible and you can see it on the screen. We've come to expect the music and stylings of the era to be woven into an open world game like this, but it also really pushes for the ugly side of the 60s. The politics and morality of the era are writ large throughout the game. It could ultimately be a rough ride with a not too pleasant cast of characters, but that doesn't mean it won't be fun.

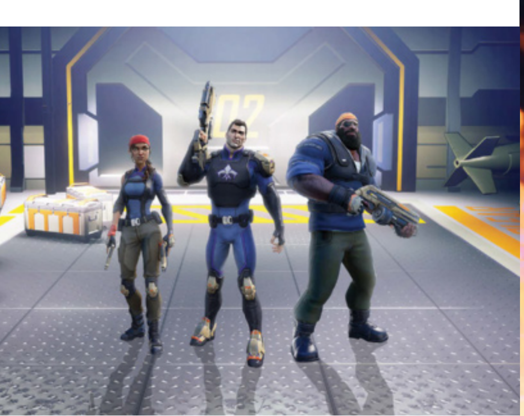
BELOW: Hollywood resembles the typical "run-and-gun" action game format more than any of his fellow Agents, relying on a mid-range assault rifle for most of his offense. He will be the perfect hero for players to chose in the early going. Right: A new and futuristic take on Seoul, South Korea serves as the main backdrop for *Agents Of Mayhem*.



THE EVIL A.I. POP STARLET

THE AGENTS' MISSION during our demo revolves around Aisha, an AI that's also one of the most popular K-Pop stars in the world. We're supposed to meet with her in an abandoned outpost and try to convince her not to join the enemy, but, of course, the mission immediately goes sideways.

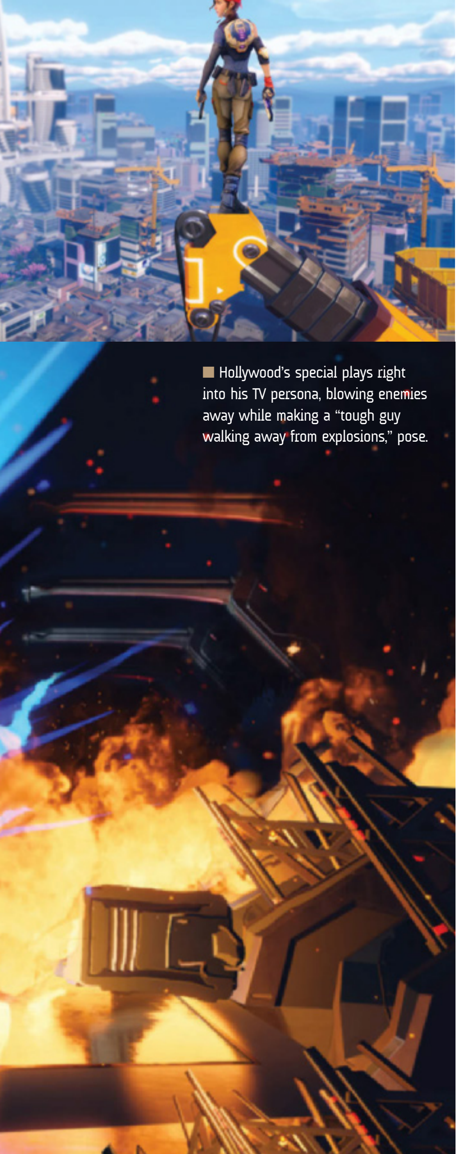
First, the "abandoned" outpost is crawling with Legion guards. Second not only does Aisha reject the Agents' proposal she announces she's going to marry Legion's leader Steeltoe before trying to trap us in the facility. Finally, she goes full-on K-Pop and serenades her beau as he tries to stomp the agents out. It's a weird and out-there story that makes perfect sense in the world of *Agents Of Mayhem*.



Above: Fortune, Hollywood, and Hardtack prepare for battle, showing one of the many Agent combinations players will have available to them.







Hollywood's special plays right into his TV persona, blowing enemies away while making a "tough guy walking away from explosions," pose.

Agents Of Mayhem

CONCEPT Take three members of an elite squadron into battle against enemy hordes in a setting ripped right from 1980s cartoons

Volition moves from Saints Row to G.I. Joe

Saints Row developer Volition Entertainment found itself in a conundrum: how does one of the top development studios in the entire gaming industry follow up a smash hit like *Saints Row IV*? *Saints Row V* is the no-brainer answer, but Volition has decided to change things up and go a different route with *Agents Of Mayhem*. The wit and sense of humour of Saints Row remains intact, but this is a brand new action game that focuses more on teamwork than just causing mayhem.

The team known as the Agents consists of 12 unique soldiers each with their own abilities, attack styles, strengths, and weaknesses. Our hands-on demo gave us access to four of those 12, allowing us to choose three of them in order to make up our team. First in the group is Hollywood, a TV star turned secret agent that wields an assault rifle for mid-range combat. Next is Fortune, a tech whiz and sky pirate that dual wields energy guns à la Lara Croft and her pistols. Third is the bruising hulk known as Hardtack, a Naval officer that specialises in getting in an enemy's face before blowing it to smithereens. The last playable hero is Rama, an archer and healer that is most effective with distance between her and the enemies. We know the names of the final eight agents to be revealed but that's it, so the four available agents will have to suffice for now.

The most important part of playing through *Agents Of Mayhem* is matching these characters together in a way that creates a balanced team, as the game allows for switching between the characters on the fly. We could spend most of the demo using Hollywood's mid-range rifle to keep enemies at bay, and then quickly switch to Hardtack should any enemies get too close for comfort. Rama's bow is perfect for quick headshots, while Fortune's speed makes her an efficient killer. Each agent uniquely reacts to each situation as well, so we could hear two completely different sets of dialogue from one playthrough to another.

Our mission is to speak with an artificial intelligence Korean pop sensation in the hopes of convincing her to not side with the bad guys. The evil faction in this demo is called Legion, an army of technologically enhanced super soldiers led by a Jamaican madman called Steeltoe. The mission is equal parts action-packed and goofy, at one point turning into a full-on K-Pop concert performance. Of course the mission goes sideways almost immediately and the Agents have to fight it out, which is where the game's sleek combat system comes into play. Switching between agents is done with one simple tap, which replaces one agent with whichever one we choose. There's little to no technical issues with this transformation, as the game maintains both frame rate and graphical quality during the switch.

As each agent is active, they slowly build a meter that can unleash a massive special attack. Hollywood's will likely be the fans' favourite of the bunch, as he makes himself invulnerable before he summons a massive explosion, which repeats as he walks around the arena. Rama's special move may be the most effective of the four, as she shoots one enemy with a poison arrow and slowly depletes his health. Each Agent also comes equipped with a unique melee attack, like Hardtack's harpoon that he swings around his head and damages anyone within the circle.

> "Agents Of Mayhem represents the culmination of over a decade of open world experience and creativity"
>
> VOLITION ENTERTAINMENT PRESS RELEASE

Agents Of Mayhem is not *Saints Row* and some fans of Volition may immediately find that disappointing, but selling this new game based on that would be selling it very short. The trademark Volition attitude and sense of humour has carried over, meaning there's plenty of one line zingers flying around to put a smile on our faces. These new Agents of Mayhem show a great deal of promise and could be exactly the kind of tongue-in-cheek action this generation needs.



INFORMATION

Details

Format:
Xbox One, PS4, PC
Origin:
USA
Publisher:
Deep Silver
Developer:
Volition Entertainment
Release:
2017
Players:
1

Developer Profile

Volition Entertainment opened its Champaign, Illinois office doors in November 1996, its first release the PC exclusive space simulation *FreeSpace*. The studio made its home console debut with *Summoner* on PlayStation 2 in 2000, and since then has been linked to many successful franchises including Red Faction and Saints Row.

Developer History

FreeSpace: The Great War **1998 [Windows]**
Summoner **2000 [PS2]**
Red Faction: Guerilla **2009 [Xbox 360,PS3,Windows]**
Saints Row The Third **2011 [Xbox 360, PS3, Windows]**

High Point

The Saints Row franchise bore a respectable open-world series with its first two instalments, but 2011's *Saints Row The Third* vaulted the name to triple-A status with its goofy action.



1

2

Days Gone

CONCEPT ■ *Days Gone* is an open-world action game set in the Pacific Northwest two years after a mysterious global pandemic destroys the world, transforming millions of people into mindless, feral creatures

Long days ahead on the broken road

***Days Gone* is quite the stunning return for Bend.** This is a PlayStation 4 exclusive that demonstrates just how powerful the console is, putting former bounty hunter Deacon St John (played by *Star Wars: The Force Unleashed*'s Starkiller actor, Sam Witwer) in the middle of a huge, open-world post-apocalypse event the likes of which we've never seen in gaming. The world is sprawling and gorgeous, the numbers of enemies on screen at any one time quite honestly staggering, and the combat intuitive and stressful; even if you're bored of zombie games, *Days Gone* is doing just about enough to renew interest. While it's a few years off from release, *Days Gone* has immediately established itself as one of the most impressive games in the pipeline, an engaging new action adventure that's looking to push convention through its systems and expand the notion of emergent gameplay in an open-world setting.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PS4
Origin: USA
Publisher: Sony Interactive Entertainment
Developer: SIE Bend Studio
Release: TBC
Players: 1

Developer Profile

Bend Studio has operated under many guises, but perhaps its most famous is Eidetic – the studio responsible for developing the Syphon Filter franchise for PlayStation. While the studio hasn't released a console game for 14 year, its attention focused on PS Vita experiences, *Days Gone* is a big statement of intent.

Developer History

Syphon Filter **1999 [PS1]**
Syphon Filter 2 **2000 [PS1]**
Syphon Filter 3 **2001 [PS1]**
Syphon Filter: The Omega Strain **2004 [PS2]**

High Point

Coming off the back of the disappointing *Bubsy 3D* in 1996, nobody expected *Syphon Filter* to be a success, but it destroyed expectation, shifting over 1 million units in its first year on shelves.

1 THE PREMISE IS PRETTY UNORIGINAL

DAYS GONE LOOKS like a lot of things. Ultimately, this does it a disservice, but it's easy to draw comparisons. It looks a little like a spin-off from *The Last Of Us* when in motion, featuring a dishevelled biker instead of a dishevelled Joel. On paper, its plot – an 'event' ravaged the world two years prior to the game beginning that turns most of the population into flesh-frenzied Freakers, leaving the survivors to operate as gangs – is a pretty hackneyed combination of *The Walking Dead* and *Sons Of Anarchy*. Basically, we're all a bit bored of zombies; thankfully the execution of the game's mechanics and systems make up for any story shortcomings.





5

> "Exemplifying true, free-form gameplay, Days Gone offers freedom to explore, strategise and play 'your way' using customisable weapons and skills, as well as brutal melee weapons and traps"
>
> BEND STUDIO, PRESS RELEASE

2 THERE IS NO RELEASE DATE IN SIGHT

WERE YOU TO judge *Days Gone* on what has been shown publicly, perhaps you'd believe a release date is in sight – that ten-minute demonstration seemed more polished than a lot of full, final releases. While the game has been in production for more than three years, it's still in early development. Bend Studios has finalised the core mechanics, themes and ideas behind the game, but now is where the hard work begins. The vertical slice demo shown has a lot of promise, of course, but now the pressure will be on for Bend – developing its first console game in over a decade - to actually deliver on its promises.

3 IT FEATURES A HUGE OPEN WORLD

DAYS GONE FEATURES an enormous environment that you can travel across at any time with your bike. While there will be a critical path and story missions that have you discovering encampments and fighting gangs, there's also a big focus on discovering new outposts and scavenging resources. This is integral for progression and survival, with the weapon-crafting system designed to make you feel like a modern-day MacGyver, where you're forced to find clever solutions with the limited tools in front of you to tackle the ridiculous amount of enemies. Be wary of the environment and the ways you can use it to your advantage, or risk being torn apart by huge groups of zombies.

4 YOUR BIKE IS YOUR BEST BUDDY

IN *DAYS GONE*, you aren't riding the open road, you're riding the *broken road* - because all of the roads are broken up by roadblocks and carnage and zombies… don't worry, you'll get it later. So, anyway, all these broken roads necessitate a lot of off-road riding, which you'll do with your heavily customised bike, called a Drifter. It's a grounded item in the world, meaning you'll need to know where it is at all times to survive – ditching it to escape Freakers on foot could cause more trouble in the long run – especially as its saddle bags hold your entire inventory.

5 IT'S RUNNING ON UNREAL ENGINE 4

EPIC MIGHT BE out of the big budget development game these days, but that doesn't mean its tech is any less impressive. Bend Studio is building *Days Gone* with the Unreal Engine 4 and the results speak for themselves. Set in the Pacific Northwest – an unspecified area around Oregon – *Days Gone* will be leaning on the Unreal 4 Engine to replicate the region's extreme weather conditions, its hazardous terrain, a detailed day/night cycle and, oh yeah, huge hordes of the walking dead. The engine has been heavily modified by Bend, which is allowing the team to achieve staggering-sized hordes composed of individual creatures – each simultaneously making their own decisions, reacting to the pack and, of course, hunting for blood and brains.



"With Microsoft helping us out, we are able to push the art further, refine the mechanics more, and deliver the Cuphead game we've always dreamed of"
CHAD MOLDENHAUER, STUDIOMDHR



Above: Cuphead mans a biplane to fight this bird stuck in a birdhouse, a boss that attacks with nail-equipped baby chicks.

Cuphead

CONCEPT Mix the platforming gameplay of *Mega Man* with cartoons like *Steamboat Willie* and *Cuphead* is the end result

So much more than we imagined

For three straight E3 Expos the gaming world has been tempted by *Cuphead*, the run-and-gun indie platformer ripped straight out of the 1930s. The whimsical boss battles and incredible animation left many mouths agape, but the only known gameplay was a series of boss battles. Developer Studio MDHR expanded on its debut project even more recently, revealing retro-style platforming stages in between those big baddie battles.

The demo level, called "Woodland Walk," brought the titular hero Cuphead and his friend Mugman to a dense wooded area patrolled by sinister flowers shooting projectiles and running toward the duo at full speed. The stage starts out slowly with one or two enemies to deflect but soon the screen fills with hostile flora, each hit taking one hit points away from the two cupheads. Both Cuphead and Mugman have three hit points a piece, but when one of the two dies the other can steal a hit point and come back into the fray. This obviously puts the other player at a disadvantage, as it could lead to an early Game Over screen if that player doesn't realise a hit point has been stolen.

The retro influences fuelling *Cuphead* ooze out of every moment, with most of the run-and-gun action and gigantic boss battles resembling *Contra* games of old while the platforming style mimics that of *Mega Man*.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: Xbox One, PC
Origin: Canada
Publisher: Studio MDHR
Developer: In-House
Release: 2016
Players: 1-2

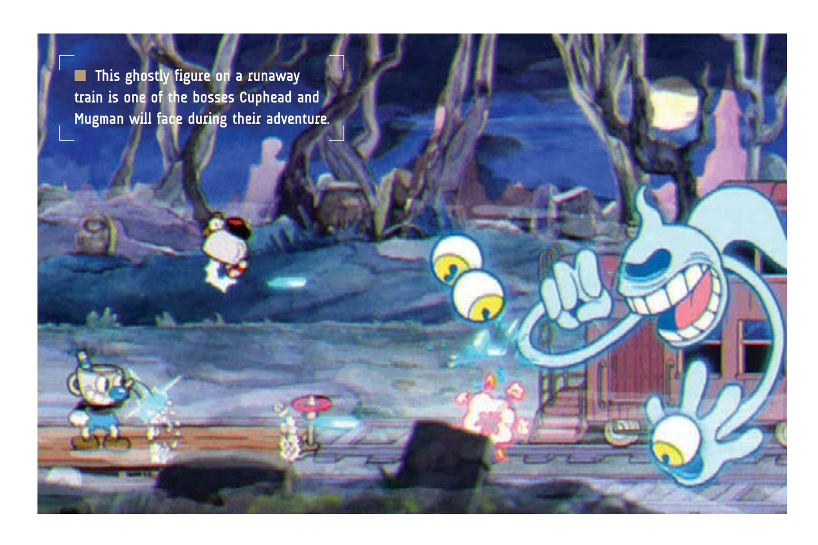
Developer Profile

Studio MDHR is making its development debut with *Cuphead* after being founded by brothers Chad and Jared Moldenhauer. The game made its public debut at E3 2014 as part of Xbox's annual media briefing. The studio features developers and animators from all across the USA and Canada.

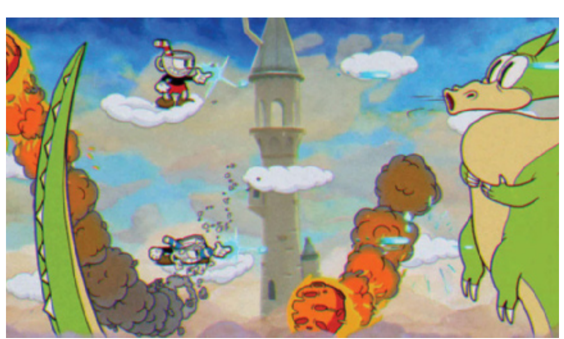
Those classic influences also bring along their difficulty levels, as the more a stage fills with enemies the harder it becomes. There are moments when the speedy sunflowers are closing in on the heroic duo that memories of *Castlevania* surface, complete with the raised blood pressure and desire to throw the controller.

The most striking thing about the game is clearly its graphical aesthetic, which shines even more brightly now that the game is nearing completion. The feeling of picking up and playing a classic cartoon straight out of the pre-World War II era is just as impressive as in demos past. The sound design also takes a old-timey approach, as the sound effect of Cuphead and Mugman shooting their guns appears to be done by voice performance rather than any mechanical method.

Every element of *Cuphead* from gameplay to graphics is clearly rooted in nostalgia, wanting to bring the best of what made games great in years past back to the forefront. Classic platforming is mixed with running and gunning, all coated in a beautiful cartoonish paint. The world has waited long enough to get its hands on this indie darling, and with a release slated for sometime this year that anticipation should be coming to an end very soon.



This ghostly figure on a runaway train is one of the bosses Cuphead and Mugman will face during their adventure.



Above: A number of Premier League players, including Anthony Martial, Dele Alli, Eden Hazard, Marcus Rashford, Reece Oxford and Harry Kane have been utilised as consultants on the story for The Journey.



Above: Player models are very impressive, which is no great surprise. These have been gradually improving with each passing year, but the Frostbite engine definitely appears to be giving the team some new tools to play with.

FIFA 17

CONCEPT ■ The annual football title from EA is seeing some big changes this year with a new engine, an RPG story mode and more

We find out why EA Canada is so excited about The Journey

Perhaps the most important thing we could say about the shift from Ignite to the Frostbite engine for *FIFA 17* is that it doesn't feel too much different. That might sound like we're damning it or saying that not enough progress has been made, but actually we consider that to be the first major victory for this year's edition. A change in engine can scupper many franchises (*Assassin's Creed Unity* springs to mind) so getting it right before doing it better is the smart move.

And yet with Frostbite behind it there are a lot of improvements already. Player models have improved, lighting is superior and we now have a full RPG-style campaign mode called The Journey. We sat down with EA Canada senior producer Nick Channon to learn more.

What does the Frostbite engine give you the opportunity to do that Ignite didn't?

The number one things is The Journey, the story mode. We just couldn't do narrative. We didn't have the toolset to be able to do it without Frostbite. That's allowed us to very much do that. It also allowed us to really look at visuals and take a step back and look at how we're doing things. Obviously we've rewritten and reworked all of those elements to move to Frostbite. It's allowed us also to work with other teams like *Battlefield* and the *BioWare* teams so that we can actually, while we always talked a lot, we can compare notes on the tech that we're in. We can ask, 'how do you do that?' and they can say 'there you go [and show us]'. If you look at the game we've added more atmospherics. The lighting's a lot different at night. A lot of those elements came from learning from the *Battlefield* team how they created more atmosphere in their levels. I think that's one of the great things not only for this year, but for the future is that this collaboration sets us up very well.

> "We spoke to BioWare to understand, really get a deep understanding, at how they do story"
> NICK CHANNON, EA CANADA

And how long have you been working with Frostbite?

Two years, around two years

Is that about the normal amount of time it takes to implement a big new change to FIFA?

Yeah, what we do is that we look at a yearly cycle of doing new features. Listen to feedback,



WHAT ABOUT THE WOMEN?

We asked Nick Channon whether or the professional women's side of FIFA was being expanded upon this year after the positive response it got to the Women's FIFA World Cup nations being included in *FIFA 16*. "It's obviously still in the game," he reassured us. "As for any new teams and new additions, we'll talk about that at a later date." Hopefully we'll see that information soon. We would like to see more national teams added and the FA WSL (Women's Super League) would be a great addition. That might be asking a lot in the midst of a engine upgrade, but we should find out soon.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PS4, Xbox One, PC
Origin: Canada
Publisher: EA
Developer: EA Canada
Release: 29 September
Players: 1-22

Developer Profile

EA Canada has been making some of Electronic Arts most successful titles since 1983. It is most famous for its work on *FIFA*, but has also worked on *NBA Live*, *NHL*, *NCAA*, the *Street* titles and *SSX* over the years.

Developer History

FIFA 16 **2015 [Multi]**
NHL 16 **2015 [PS4, Xbox One]**
SSX **2012 [PS3, 360]**
Def Jam Vendetta **2003 [Multi]**

High Point

Last year's *FIFA 16* continued a strong run of constantly improving releases marking the best that the Ignite engine could achieve. This should mark the next leap forward for the franchise.

what the players like, what they don't like. But obviously at the same time, we're looking at technology changes, at features that maybe take longer than a year. All the physical overhaul we've been working on for nearly three years. All different elements come in at different times.

The game did feel a little more physical to us and perhaps a little slower?

A few people have said that. We' haven't slowed the game down. I think that as you add elements to it, the game feels different. We're not done, so there's still tuning and balancing to be done. We're in that stage right now where all the elements are there and now it's fine tuning and looking for exploits, people giving us feedback. 'I scored too many X goals', and so on. That's kind of the phase we're in, so, you know, it can still change.

Is there anything you have learnt from other EA studios that you have been able to implement in *FIFA 17*?

I don't think there's anything unexpected, but we've certainly learnt a lot lighting wise for the game this year and again, looking especially at how the *Battlefield* team create their atmospherics are amazing. How can we bring some of those elements to our game? Very early on when we started on making The Journey, we spoke to *BioWare* to understand, really get a deep understanding, at how they do story. They're pretty damn good at making story and narrative. What do they do? What are the processes they use? What are the dos and don'ts? So, those are the kind of things that we've done. I wouldn't say there are any surprises there, but certainly being on the same technology has huge advantages.

Has any new trend in the sport come up that you've had to react to quickly this year?

We're always looking at celebrations and the next kind of cool little thing like that. We look at what people are doing in that sense. We try and bring a fresh flavour to some of those things each year. We're based in Vancouver, the game is actually made out of EA Vancouver, but we're very fortunate that we get every Premier League game. We're always watching games, trying to get inspiration.

When *FIFA 17* players pick up the controller and start playing, what can they expect that is unique to this game?

I think the first thing they'll notice when they're playing the game is the active intelligence, the attacking movement. It feels very different. It feels like you've got a lot more options. It's pretty cool in the fact that you feel that you can change the way you attack. And then the physical play I think gives a real element using left trigger to really hold people off and stuff.

With the attacking intelligence, is that dictated by player vision, attacking position, or some other internal stats?

We try and make sure there's variety in different teams and this give us more opportunity to give a little more personality to the players themselves too. I think we want the game to be fun and have those attacking elements, but you should see some differentiation in the game this year.



Above: Atmosphere has been an area of particular improvement, made possible by the Frostbite engine. EA Canada looked for advice and assistance from DICE to see how it could best use its *Battlefield* tech for recreating the feel of a real football stadium.



■ Below: Rextro (the Sixtyfourus) is a dinosaur who, naturally, runs an arcade full of mini-game machines. These games support up to four local players.



INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC, PS4, Wii U, Xbox One
Origin: UK
Publisher: Team17
Developer: Playtonic
Release: Q1 2017
Players: 1

Developer Profile

Formed by numerous ex-Rare employees, the Playtonic team has quite the CV between them. From *GoldenEye* to *Banjo-Kazooie*, this ultra-talented pool of game developers know what it takes to release a blockbuster hit, releasing games between them for the last 30 years.

High Point

Raising its crowdfunding goal of £175,000 in just 38 minutes, the campaign would go on to raise more than £2 million. An impressive haul for a genre thought to have been left behind by fans.

Yooka-Laylee

CONCEPT ■ Lead the team of Yooka and Laylee through a world filled with delightful characters and villains, leaving no stone unturned.

A new day is dawning for the classic platforming genre

After years of seeing pixelart games succeed it's time to remember an era when 3D adventure platform games thrived. Developer Playtonic launched its *Yooka-Laylee* Kickstarter in 2015 with the aim of revisiting the classic *Banjo-Kazooie* formula and giving it a modern take. It's was a concept that found a great deal of support and Playtonic's modern approach is mixing new technology with some retro ideas.

One of the most noticeable touches is the colour pallet, reminiscent in many ways to that of the N64. Enriched with a paint style that is wonderfully nostalgic, it's even had to recreate a sort of Nintendo-esque hand drawn font to accompany the art style and joyfully quirky characters. It's a game filled with extra touches that are instantly recognisable to fans of the classic series this game follows.

Yooka-Laylee offers a large open-world full of moving platforms and a plethora of collectables. Grabbing feathers and eggs will unlock special moves, while pages will open up new worlds entirely and you can even use them to expand levels.

Spending these pages to grow the size of a level will unlock all new areas that you couldn't see before. The game seems to hint that some areas will only be available if you upgrade the worlds you've already visited. You'll be going back for more in each stage to keep things expanding, in other words.

So, if you're into your collecting, you will feel at home here. Rare items will be hidden in the levels for you to seek out, but you might have to change the biome a little to find them.

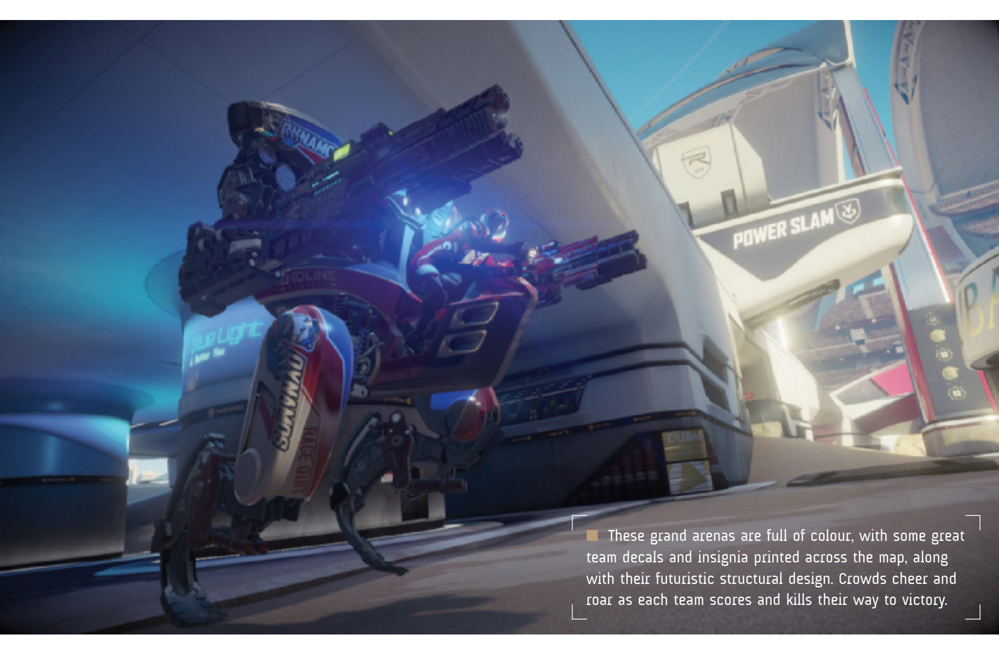
Different ammo types will change the environment around you too. For example, a big frozen lake might hide a few gems, unearthing fresh water could allow you to swim into the depths and uncover treasures. These effects are done in quite nifty ways. We enjoyed turning a raincloud called Nimbo into a tool – firing different ammo types into the cloud to create different effects as you desire.

The game is scattered with delightful characters too, not to say your pairing of a chameleon and bat aren't interesting enough already. You will visit these characters to purchase items like power-up tonics and unlockable skills. Expect plenty of classic Brit humour, as a snake named Trowzer is just the start of things.

Nostalgia aside, there have only been a few great games in this genre in recent memory. A new audience of players may emerge who were not of even lucky enough to experience this sort of title in the Nineties.

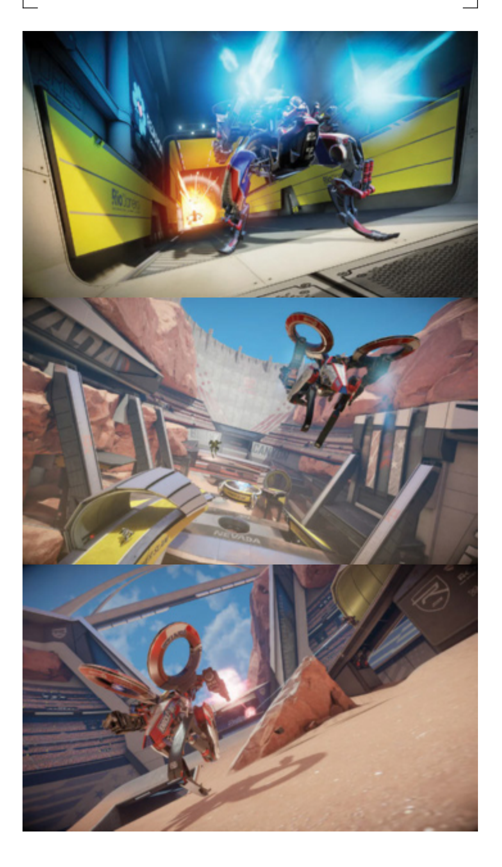
A few retro touches – such as subtitled text, noises and mumbles for dialogue – might be a little too old-school for some players, with the modern gamer potentially expecting full voice over and Hollywood, Pixar-style character animation. But then, it's things like this made the Banjo-Kazooie series such a success in the first place.

> "While we felt confident we could ship the game in October as originally planned, the team has decided that it would like to add a few extra months' polish to our schedule"
>
> GAVIN PRICE PLAYTONIC



These grand arenas are full of colour, with some great team decals and insignia printed across the map, along with their futuristic structural design. Crowds cheer and roar as each team scores and kills their way to victory.

Below: RIG designs are host to plenty of variety. From the strong armoured sluggish types, to the light resourceful variants.



RIGS: Mechanized Combat League

CONCEPT A VR sports game which puts you in the pilot seat of a mechanised suit to duke it out in a sports arena.

Mechanised sports are the future

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PS4
Origin: UK
Publisher: Sony Computer Entertainment
Developer: Guerrilla Cambridge
Release: Q4 2016
Players: 1-6

Developer Profile

Formerly SCE Studio Cambridge, Guerrilla Cambridge has worked on titles that include the Killzone franchise and *LittleBigPlanet* on the Playstation portable platforms.

Developer History

Killzone Mercenary, **2013 [PS VITA]**
LittleBigPlanet, **2009 [PSP]**
24: The Game, **2007 [PS2]**
MediEval, **1998 [PSone]**

High Point

That original *MediEvil* from 1998 still stands out as a highlight in the lifetime of this studio. We doubt that anything from that game will have a major influence on this VR multiplayer experience, but perhaps success here will afford the team some time to resurrect its greatest franchise.

What will sports be like in the near-future? Well if it doesn't turn out to be rocket cars kicking footballs about, it could just as easily be mechs replacing humans in a number of sports arenas.

RIGS: Mechanized Combat League will offer a handful of different 'future-sports' to take part in, but what we got some hands-on time with was its take on basketball. Strapping on our PS VR headset and entering the garage of our sports team, we selected our preferred mech type. They differ in their speed, on board weapons and their general movement capabilities, so picking the right mech could prove important.

Each mech has two large weapons strapped to it. You aim with your head and shoot accordingly, using the left analogue stick to move around and making use of a dash button for a burst of speed when you need it the most. Weapon loadouts are dependent on what mech you've chosen, so balancing your team and playing to your strengths are important.

In the mode that we played, killing opponents would have them drop energy orbs. Get enough orbs and your RIG will 'overload'. Once overloaded, you essentially become the basketball that needs to get dunked through an overtly large basket. If you manage to self-dunk yourself, your team will gain a point.

Of course, it isn't going to be that easy. Once you've become overloaded, sirens and all sorts start going off. Everyone is going to know you're as hot as a pistol.

The combat feels really satisfying, especially as you look and see your lasers lock onto your opponent. You could decide to play the role as your team's hitman, going entirely on the aggressive and just making mince-meat of your opponents.

If you fall victim to an enemy, you will be redeployed onto the battlefield from above. You will hover above the field and look out for possible drop points to become available. Once they are active, you select them and freefall down – smashing into the ground with debris surrounding you. What doesn't sound kind of awesome about that?

It took a little getting used to, but we have found this tends to be the case with most VR experiences. We found very little struggle with tackling the combat, but we did have frequent issues with gauging what speed and distance we were travelling. Numerous times it felt like we were coming up short while trying to make that key jump or gain enough speed to jump across a ramp to score a vital point.

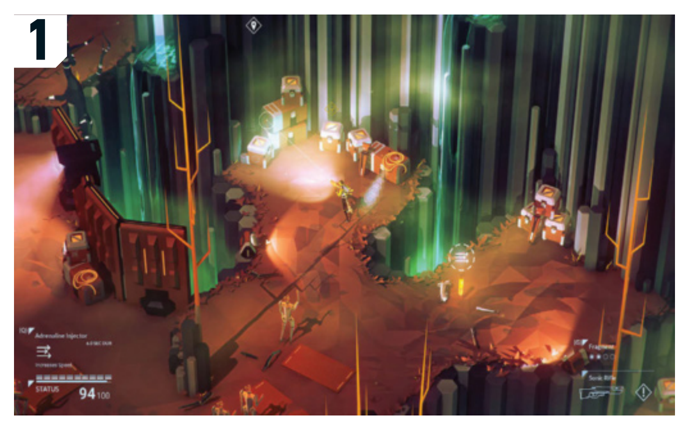
Although, it is also easy to get distracted by the great scale of the arenas. The cinematic entrance of you coming down in a lift to the sound of massive crowds and stadium announcements is pretty impressive, for instance.

Ultimately, it will be interesting to see how much replayabillity *RIGS* will offer. Even though we saw plenty of mechs to choose from and have been promised numerous sports to take part in, it feels like this could still end up as a very casual tech-demo for VR if it's not careful.

> "The worlds of motorsport and combat have collided to create the Mechanized Combat League"
> PIERS JACKSON, GUERRILLA CAMBRIDGE

SHOWCASE

MORE TITLES TO WATCH FOR ON THE GAMING HORIZON


1


2


3



4


5

BEACON

Format: **Xbox One, PC**
Publisher: **Monothetic**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **TBC 2017**

1 A dark sci-fi concept typically makes you feel a little bit uncomfortable, and that's exactly what *Beacon* manages to do with its cloning mechanic. As a rogue-like, top-down shooter, you must blast your way around a hostile planet you've just crashed on. Every time you die, you'll be reborn in the cloning chamber at the start of the game using whatever DNA it can gather, including that of the dead alien life forms you have scattered around you. The result is that weirdly stomach-churning feeling we like in our philosophically grey sci-fi as gradually more and more mutated versions of the character emerge.

MASQUERADA: SONGS AND SHADOWS

Format: **PS4, PC**
Publisher: **Ysbryd Games**
Developer: **Witching Hour Studios**
ETA: **TBC 2016**

2 Seemingly taking some of its stylistic cues from *The Banner Saga*, Witching Hour Studios looks to be doing a pretty amazing job of combining the graphical approach of Stoic's games with combat more reminiscent of *Dragon Age*. This tactical action RPG allows you to hack and slash with your small team of comrades as you attempt to play your part in an ongoing civil war, but you can also halt the action and set out attacks for each team member in a similar fashion to BioWare's series. The result is a frantic mix of melee combat, magic and tactical play that all takes place on the fly. Definitely a game to keep your eye on.

FAR

Format: **Xbox One, PC**
Publisher: **Mixtvision Digital GmbH**
Developer: **Mr. Whale's Game Service**
ETA: **Q1 2017**

3 Bringing to mind a mixture of *Sheltered*, the post-nuclear fallout family survival experience, and *FTL*, the deep-space exploration game, *FAR* is really a much simpler concept than either and yet no less interesting. You must travel the wastes of a dried-up ocean bed, recovering salvage and keeping your massive vehicle fuelled and repaired, occasionally upgrading it to face challenges ahead. It's a gorgeous side-scrolling adventure that promises to be packed with mystery and interesting puzzles to solve on top of the general survival maintenance aspect of the game. We like the almost monotone art style too.

THIMBLEWEED PARK

Format: **Xbox One, PC, iOS, Android**
Publisher: **Terrible Toybox**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **Q1 2017**

4 With Ron Gilbert and Gary Winnick leading the charge on this brand new adventure game, we can't help but be very, very excited. Packed with weird characters, the duo's trademark wit and plenty of references to *Twin Peaks* and *The X-Files*, *Thimbleweed Park* is looking like it's going to be a lot of fun to explore. As ever, we expect the puzzles to be challenging and sometimes rather bizarre to solve, and thanks to the Lynch influences, the team's traditional idiosyncratic approach is likely to only get weirder. At the moment, it's looking like an amazing spiritual successor to the classic *Maniac Mansion*.

THE LONG JOURNEY HOME

Format: **PS4, Xbox One, PC**
Publisher: **Daedalic Entertainment**
Developer: **Daedalic Studio West**
ETA: **Q4 2016**

5 Daedalic's fascinating new survival experience is a game of many genres. As you're stranded on the other side of the galaxy after a space jump test goes wrong, you must find your way back to Earth. Between planets, you have some physics-fuelled flight path gameplay, and closer in it turns into a game of *Asteroids* as you dodge and shoot at incoming obstructions. Break into the atmosphere and you turn the game into a side-scrolling flight experience. Get even closer and you can meet and interact with alien lifeforms. It's all procedurally generated and should provide quite a challenge as you seek out resources to jump home.





HOW **POKÉMON GO** CAUGHT US ALL

We explore the incredible story of how Niantic's mobile game captured the world's imagination with the people it has affected the most; the players

"I've never seen a force so powerful to bring people together as *Pokémon Go* has done." That's no overstatement from the founder of the *Pokémon Go* New York Facebook page. Going by the handle Dankizard, he has borne witness to some of the incredible scenes of *Pokémon Go* players in New York you may have seen online. The footage of hundreds of players flocking into the park as a Vaporeon spawned there was, for many, the moment where the true scale of *Pokémon Go*'s impact became clear. This wasn't some cash-in of a classic brand or a half-measure towards converting classic Nintendo titles to mobile devices. Niantic and The Pokémon Company had hit upon something truly captivating.

And perhaps that should not have been a surprise, but it was. While we like to think we have a firm understanding of the appeal of the Pokémon games there can be no denying that sales had been consistently dropping over the last 20 years following the 59 million copies of *Pokémon Red* and *Blue* on the Game Boy. At present it looks like *Pokémon Go* has even managed to exceed those figures with downloads on iOS and Android (Apple has confirmed that it has already broken iOS week one sales records). We've always enjoyed the series, but it was beginning to feel as if only the most hardcore of older fans and a smattering of new players really cared anymore. *Pokémon Go* has awakened that passion again.

Pokémon Go has been a project driven by passion from the beginning. Starting as a 2014 April Fools' Day joke conceived by Satoru Iwata and The Pokémon Company's Tsunekazu Ishihara in collaboration with Google, their tease of *Pokémon Challenge* ignited a mass of interest. Combining the data of Google maps with an augmented reality Pokémon experience was instantly captivating to fans. The trailer for the pretend role of *Pokémon Hunter* at Google has many of the aspects of *Pokémon Go* today, with the creatures appearing on screens, throwing Poké Balls to capture them and searching far and wide to catch them all.

As it happened Ishihara also happened to be a big fan of *Ingress*, Niantic's augmented reality game made when it was a part of Google and saw the potential of that game to form the template of a similar augmented reality experience for Pokémon. Nintendo's plan to expand into smartphone titles was in some ways Iwata's parting masterstroke before he passed away, picked up by Nintendo's new president Tatsumi Kimishima. But then Nintendo's first move into the market, Miitomo, didn't exactly fill us with hope. Thankfully, *Pokémon Go* using Ingress as a starting point, has proven to be a much smarter integration of smartphone tech and IP than the social networking app. »



While the experience of catching a *Pokémon* is far easier if you switch off AR mode for capturing, we can't deny the extra pleasure we get from seeing a Charmander sitting in front of us on our smartphones.

It rather begs the question, what is it exactly about *Pokémon Go* that makes it special? "I think it's the pursuit that brings people together," says Dankizard. "The pursuit of Pokémon, the pursuit of Gyms, the pursuit to be the very best like no one ever was. Anyone who played *Pokémon* as a kid, dreamed of it becoming a reality. It's just about as real as it can get now and millions of people are seeing their childhood dream come true. We all wanted it to happen. And now that it's here, we feel like we all made it happen collectively."

There's certainly something about *Pokémon Go* that appears to be tapping into the root appeal of the series, perhaps only enhanced by the game using the original 150 Pokémon, bringing back many memories for older fans and giving new players a clean slate from which to learn about this world. In many ways *Pokémon Go* is a pure interpretation of the ideas that began this series in the first place. "*Pokémon* creator Satoshi Tajiri was an avid bug collector as a child, which later lead to being his inspiration for *Pokémon*," Lewis Knight, founder of **games™**'s local *Pokémon Go* Bournemouth & Poole Facebook group, reminded us. "This is a natural evolution (pardon the pun) of that initial idea. Coupled with the team based competition and the social aspects of being able to compare Pokémon or ask advice on where to catch certain Pokémon. I think this is why it has become so popular and has brought so many people together."

It's an important point that *Pokémon Go*'s appeal isn't just about the aesthetics of the experience, but the nature of it too.

> "MILLIONS OF PEOPLE ARE SEEING THEIR CHILDHOOD DREAM COME TRUE"

It is a game that demands engagement with the outside world and can easily instigate real world interactions in a way that no other videogame has done, perhaps since the original Pokémon games. *Pokémon Go* has managed to foster a community almost instantly that wants to meet other players and engage with them.

But before we look more deeply into the social phenomenon of the game, we still need to tackle a larger question about this series; how has it remained so popular after all these years?

"I think part of what has kept Pokémon going is the fact that it's constantly evolving," is Joe Merrick's assessment. Merrick is the webmaster and founder of the long-running Pokémon fansite **serebii.net**, started way back in 1999. "There are new elements added with each iteration, new Pokémon, and even with the spin-off games lots of new ideas keep being brought in that make the series fascinating."

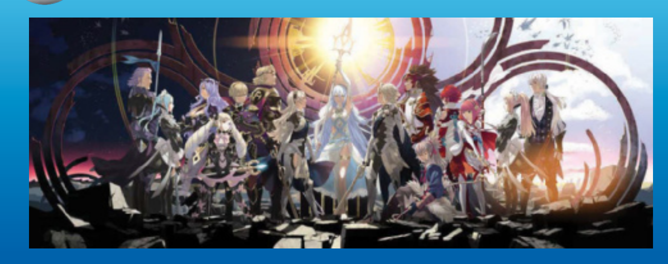
For Steve Black Jr, host of the world's most popular Pokémon podcast, *It's Super Effective*, the appeal is very simple. "Speaking for myself, Pokémon really hits home with me because of the collecting. I'm the person that needs all the seasons of a TV show, or all the albums from a certain music artist, or all the hidden items in a video game. I just like to collect things and Pokémon scratches that itch. On top of that, Pokémon have really strong designs, names, and lore behind them, which just builds on top of the collection aspect. At the end of the day, Pokémon has something for everyone. You could be into the anime or the completive battling or the card game or the spin-off games (like *Pokémon Snap*) or just the collecting aspect. I can tell you right now, everyone playing *Pokémon Go* is really sold on the collecting aspect, which is just fantastic to see."

There has always been an element of hoarding to the series that has kept us playing, as the famous catch phrase for the game became a mantra for fans, we had to catch 'em all. It's that same impulse that has seen us chase after Achievements and Trophies on Xbox and PlayStation consoles or find every Easter egg in a new Rockstar game. Most gamers have a completionist element to their personalities that demands to be satisfied and even if we never quite get to achieve our goal, the journey there, the struggle to complete an experience, is often the thing we enjoy most about it anyway.

The next logical question though is who exactly is playing *Pokémon Go*? Is it just fans of the series from the last 20 years, many of whom are returning or are new players being drawn in by this refreshed and reset experience? Merrick thinks a lot of it is lapsed fans of the game. "From what we can see, the largest part of the fans of *Go* are people who weren't really still into Pokémon. There's an element of it hitting the curiosity of people who played it back in the Nineties when they were younger and hitting that nostalgia element."

"From walking around different cities and overhearing conversations, you have a mixture of Pokémon and non-

WHAT GAME IS NEXT? The titles Nintendo has been waiting to move to mobile



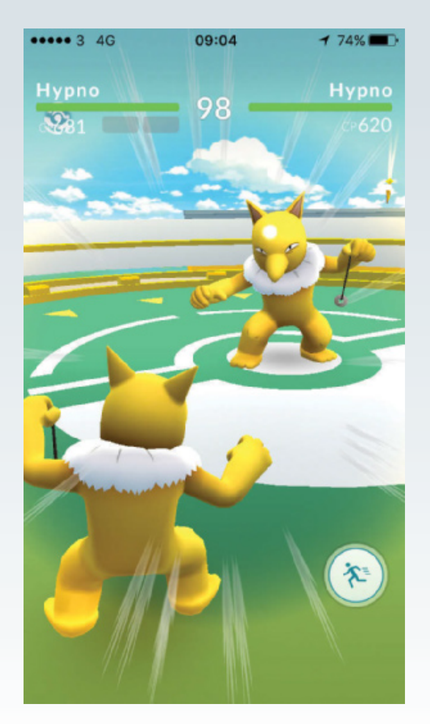
FIRE EMBLEM

Strategy titles have proven to translate rather nicely to smartphones and tablets over the years and have, of course, already been integrated nicely with touch interfaces on DS and 3DS. *Fire Emblem* isn't a game that will easily be simplified in the way that *Pokémon Go* has been and as such may not have quite the same easy access for new players, but even so it has just as passionate a fanbase to build upon. It will be releasing for free and is being developed by DeNA, the same developer that made the Miitomo app.



ANIMAL CROSSING

Also being released for free and developed by DeNA, *Animal Crossing* seems a far more likely candidate for replicating the kind of widespread appeal of *Pokémon Go* than *Fire Emblem*, not least because it has the same kind of easy, multi-demographic appeal as Game Freak's series. With its cast of fun animal characters and elements of hunting and customising, it could make for a fantastic sim experience on mobile devices, so long as it isn't chopped up by microtransactions. If DeNA gets this one right, it could be a huge success.



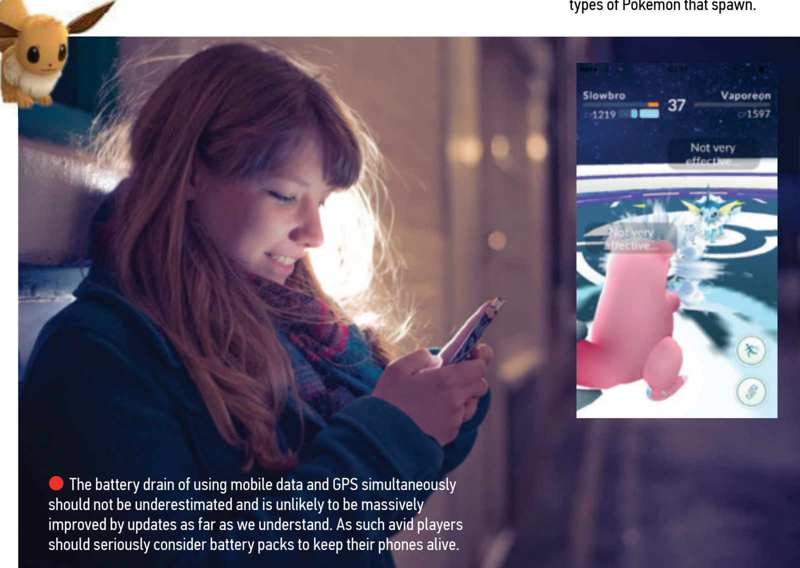


Pokémon fans playing," says Black Jr. "My sister for example fell off after Red/Blue, but now she's playing *Go* and she's excited that she knows most of the Pokémon she runs into. The game right now is more of a social experience built around collecting monsters. I'm sure some care or get excited when they see a certain Pokémon, but others just want to catch them all and they won't bother to learn the names; both are acceptable ways to play. That being said, I hope that new Pokémon and/or features being added keep these players. Pokémon fans aren't going anywhere, but I think it's important for Niantic and The Pokémon Company to capture and convince players to actually become fans outside of *Go*. Hopefully my podcast can help with this too."

The level of engagement so far would suggest that *Pokémon Go* isn't going anywhere soon. Helped in part by its release in the summer season for the Northern Hemisphere, players are flocking to PokéStops and Gyms, hanging out together in parks and as we've found speaking with Dankizard and Lewis Knight, making new friendships through social media groups setting up events and meet-ups. One of the more spectacular of these was of course that video from Central Park in New York City we mentioned earlier. It's a small snippet of footage that speaks to a wider movement both in that city and beyond. »



It's a good idea to look around your local area to see what different types of land you might have about. Location has a huge bearing on the types of Pokémon that spawn.



The battery drain of using mobile data and GPS simultaneously should not be underestimated and is unlikely to be massively improved by updates as far as we understand. As such avid players should seriously consider battery packs to keep their phones alive.



POKÉMON GO PLUS FAQ

What is Pokémon Go Plus?
It's a small Bluetooth device that links to your smartphone. You can wear it on your wrist or clip it to your clothing and it will vibrate and light up when in-game events take place, such as a Pokémon appearing nearby.

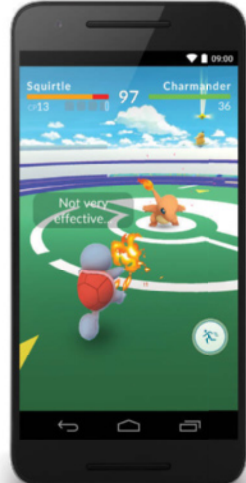
What else can it do?
It can actually catch Pokémon for you without getting your phone out of your pocket or bag. When it lights up you can press its button to automatically attempt to catch the creature. If you're successful it will light up to let you know you've caught it. You can only use standard Poké Balls and catch Pokémon you've caught before with this method.

Won't it drain my battery even more?
It could do, but The Pokémon Company says it will use a low energy Bluetooth connection, plus you can keep your game in sleep mode, saving energy from it having to illuminate again.

Is it out yet?
It was originally scheduled for release in August, but Nintendo recently announced it was delaying the launch until September. No specific reason was given for this at the time.

So, Nintendo is making these?
Yes, while Nintendo is only a part-owner of The Pokémon Company and investor in Niantic, it is the company handling these accessories, which should prove to be very popular and useful. The delay of the launch may prove critical though.





All of the effectiveness rules between different Pokémon types from more recent games apply in *Pokémon Go*, so it's worth familiarising yourself with them again before taking on a Gym.

"I've not only seen the amazing videos, I've been right at the heart of them and even recorded some," Dankizard tells us. "It's just breathtaking. There's really no way to describe it… Any veteran player is sure to feel euphoria at the sight of hundreds of fellow players running in a mob, with the hopes of catching a Charizard. When a rare Pokémon appears in Central Park (basically our headquarters) everyone is overwhelmed with excitement. The pursuit forms strong bonds between players and the mobs we have around here are like nothing anyone has ever seen before."

And this brings up another important aspect of the success of *Pokémon Go*. While there is a mixture of new and old fans playing, the fact that there was already a fanbase ready to embrace the game meant that groundwork was being put in place even before the game came out. Groups such as the New York *Pokémon Go* Facebook page launched weeks before the game, garnering interest and preparing for the big day.

"My friend and I anticipated the magnitude of this game and saw an opportunity to build, not financially, but socially," Dankizard explains to us. "Our goal at first was to build up the hype for the game in NYC. When we saw how popular it was, we began working on building camaraderie among the NYC players. Our page may not be the most popular, but our members are very devout, not only to the game, but to each other. We've had meet ups that totalled numbers in the hundreds, even over 1,000, which is about half of the total amount of people who have liked our page."

Knight saw what was happening elsewhere and looked to try and replicate it in his area. "I'd seen the social impact the game had had elsewhere in the world, I wanted to try and build a safe and pleasant community for players to be able to arrange meet-ups and social events in the area. Having also been a part of StreetPass communities, I've seen the positive impact they can have on people who may not necessarily get out to meet new people, an issue I've had myself since moving to Bournemouth."

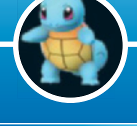
Knight brings up an interesting point; Nintendo has actually been trying to encourage this kind of real-world interaction between its players, favouring local connections over internet connections, for years. Nintendo 3DS players are well versed in what it means to bump into strangers who happen to be playing the same games, finding a common link to each other through this shared interest. As such the core fanbase was not only ready to embrace and enjoy *Pokémon Go* as a game, it was also ready to embrace it as a socialising tool and as such new players with no



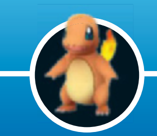
WHERE TO FIND POKÉMON

The spawn locations you should be looking out for

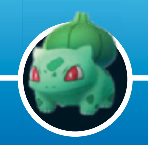




WATER
HIGH SPAWN RATES:
Rivers, streams, lakes, ponds, docks, beaches, oceans, canals
LOWER SPAWN RATES:
Wetlands, parks



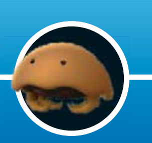
FIRE
HIGH SPAWN RATES:
Farmland, arid areas
LOWER SPAWN RATES:
Cities, residential areas, beaches, parks



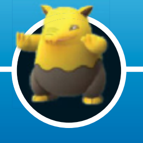
GRASS
HIGH SPAWN RATES:
Gardens, parks, golf courses, woodland
LOWER SPAWN RATES:
Farmland, hiking trails, nature reserves



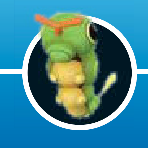
ELECTRIC
HIGH SPAWN RATES:
Universities, college campuses
LOWER SPAWN RATES:
Cities, commercial areas



ROCK
HIGH SPAWN RATES:
Farmland, quarries, parking lots
LOWER SPAWN RATES:
Hiking trails, nature reserves, parks



PSYCHIC
HIGH SPAWN RATES:
Hospitals, cities
LOWER SPAWN RATES:
Residential areas (at night)



BUG
HIGH SPAWN RATES:
Parks, golf courses, gardens, meadows
LOWER SPAWN RATES:
Farmland, woodland, nature reserves



awareness of this background have walked straight into a ready-made, friendly and engaged community.

"The response to our social ambition has been astounding," exclaims Dankizard. "We have forged friendships between many people in the NYC area who otherwise would not have met. We have hundreds of players battling the same Gyms, chasing the same Pokémon all in the same vicinity. It's been two weeks at this point and we still have not had a criminal incident. It's all love and the love we share for the game is apparent and almost overwhelming."

The situation has been similar for Knight. "The response has been absolutely phenomenal. I've managed communities for StreetPass groups and my podcast, but they have never gone past 500 members. To have over 2,000 members and have the group featured in a local newspaper is just mind blowing for me. Obviously with any community we have had issues with abusive members, but we try our best to shut them down before it can become a major problem."

Knight is right of course that the negative side of any social gathering is to be expected, but it has been a particular concern with regards to *Pokémon Go* because of the prevalence of young players and the potential, given the GPS tracking, that it could be used for nefarious reasons. Reports of thefts and attacks have been heavily scrutinised as the game captured our imaginations. But perhaps the greater concern is really that players aren't paying enough attention to the world around them as they play. It was a big enough issue that the Japanese government issued safety tips for playing the game prior to its release with warnings not to play while managing a vehicle or bicycle, beware of private property and the possibility of trespassing, and to stay hydrated in the summer heat if players are out for long periods of time. "When you go out to play, keep your head up, look around, enjoy the world around you and be safe," added Niantic chief executive John Hanke in a video message to players.

So, what of the game itself? Well, it's obviously proving to be massively popular, but it's not without its faults and issues as some of our interviewees pointed out. "As a game, I would say *Pokémon Go* is broken," is Dankizard's frank assessment. "No game has ever been so popular, so it is understandable that Niantic is having issues with server bandwidth. I know when the server goes down, hearts around the city, and around the world, drop. But Niantic is working hard on these issues and I'm confident that we will have a stable game as soon as possible. Other than that, the potential of the game is absolutely limitless. I can't wait for the first legendary event."

Some of this has been addressed by Niantic, but it can't be denied that server issues are still prevalent and frustrating. »



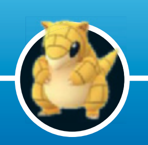


Egg hatching is apparently best achieved by walking in a straight line as the game checks in an intervals in order to measure the distance you have walked and moving in any kind of circle or meandering pattern will not register as easily.



Learning the best time to save or spend Stardust and candy for levelling up and evolving Pokémon is one of the trickiest skills you will find in *Pokémon Go*. It is often best to save them until you are levelled up a bit higher.

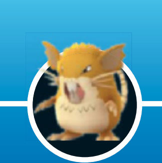
> "EVERYONE PLAYING POKÉMON GO IS REALLY SOLD ON THE COLLECTING ASPECT, WHICH IS JUST FANTASTIC TO SEE"



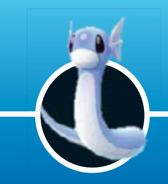
GROUND
HIGH SPAWN RATES: Farmland, woodland, quarries
LOWER SPAWN RATES: Hiking trails, fields, golf courses, parks



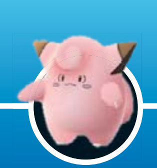
POISON
HIGH SPAWN RATES: Wetlands, ponds, lakes
LOWER SPAWN RATES: Industrial areas, large buildings



NORMAL
HIGH SPAWN RATES: Universities, college campuses
LOWER SPAWN RATES: Residential areas, parking Lots



DRAGON
HIGH SPAWN RATES: Golf courses, landmarks
LOWER SPAWN RATES: Places of interest



FAIRY
HIGH SPAWN RATES: Beaches
LOWER SPAWN RATES: Landmarks, churches, cemeteries



FIGHTING
HIGH SPAWN RATES: Gyms, sporting centres
LOWER SPAWN RATES: Stadiums, recreation areas



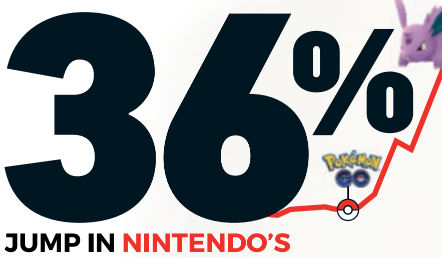
GHOST
HIGH SPAWN RATES: Churches, residential areas (at night)
LOWER SPAWN RATES: Residential areas



ICE
HIGH SPAWN RATES: Bodies of water, ski resorts, glaciers
LOWER SPAWN RATES: Grassy areas

POKÉMON GO IN NUMBERS

THE AMAZING STATS THE MOBILE GAME IS ALREADY GENERATING



36%

JUMP IN NINTENDO'S SHARE PRICE FOLLOWING POKÉMON GO'S RELEASE

350,000

PEOPLE IN THE UK

WERE PLAYING POKÉMON GO BEFORE ITS OFFICIAL RELEASE THANKS TO ANDROID APK DOWNLOADS AND AMERICAN APP STORE ACCOUNTS

47%

OF ALL IN-APP PURCHASES ON 10 JULY 2016 WERE CREDITED TO POKÉMON GO ACCORDING TO SLICE INTELLIGENCE

AVERAGE APP USAGE TIME ACCORDING TO SENSORTOWER

Pokémon Go	**33m 25s**
Facebook	22m 8s
Snapchat	18m 7s
Twitter	17m 56s
Instagram	15m 15s
Slither.io	10m 8s

10%

OF MICROTRANSACTION REVENUES ESTIMATED TO GO TO NINTENDO

Spain	46.4 MILLION
Argentina	43.6 MILLION
Pokémon GO	**40.0 MILLION**
Poland	38.4 MILLION
Canad	36.1 MILLION

40 MILLION

DOWNLOADS ESTIMATED BY 20 JULY

10.81%

OF ANDROID DEVICES IN USA ESTIMATED TO HAVE POKÉMON GO



Speaking to *Time magazine*, Hanke acknowledged the issue. "We planned for success, and we provisioned our infrastructure for it. But to be honest, we've been overwhelmed by the level of interest, by the sheer number of people who want to play and the amount of time they want to play. It definitely surprised us."

Each of our other experts has their own take on what Niantic needs to think about for the game. "I think *Pokémon Go* is fine for a first release," says Black Jr. "It crashes a lot and the servers are not the most stable, but I think the player base doesn't care at this point. I think it's important for Niantic to make the user-interface of the app appealing, faster, and easier for people to stick with it. Right now, it's awesome to catch 50 or so Pokémon on a night out, but transferring those to get candy is a bit of a pain."

"I like it, but it's a bit too simple," is Merrick's take on the game. "There's just not enough to actually do when you've ended up catching all the Pokémon around you already." And Knight agrees, it could do with some more depth, but is enjoying the broader social rewards of the experience enough for now? "Whilst I really enjoy the game, in its current form it's fairly basic and not without its issues, but that should be expected with a game so popular. It's the other effects, like bringing people together, that I like."

At present, we know that a few key updates are in the works at Niantic now that it has launched in all of its major markets. Top of the agenda is of course trading of Pokémon, which has been at the heart of the game's experience whether in virtual or real world form as a trading card game. We can also expect to see Gyms get an upgrade allowing for greater customisation and some changes to PokéStops too. Hanke has also teased some updates for the AR interface, but the nature of these has yet to be revealed. There are however a number of other things we would all like to see added to the game that could further enhance the experience.

"I'd actually like to see trading be only local," Black Jr suggests, which strikes us as a very smart move. "I think we'd



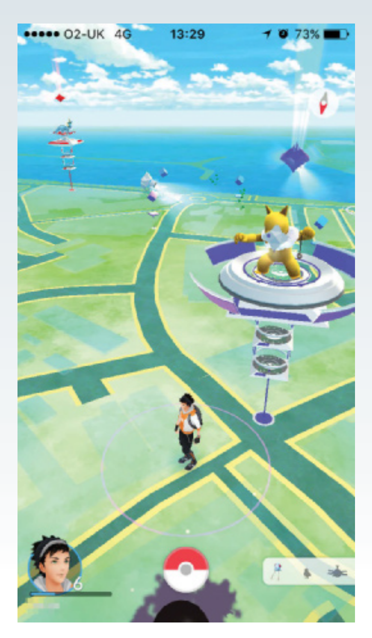
IS POKÉMON GO GOOD FOR YOUR HEALTH?

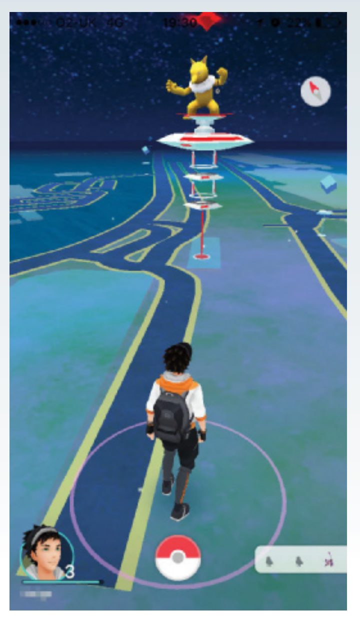
WE ASK THE EXPERTS ABOUT THE POTENTIAL BENEFITS OF PLAYING THE GAME

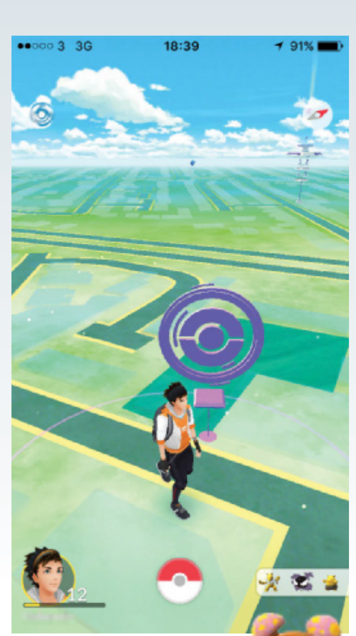
While some have been concerned about safety with regards to *Pokémon Go*, many have been equally keen to explore potential health benefits to playing the game. There have, for instance, been a number of anecdotes about people with anxiety or other mental health issues finding *Pokémon Go* helpful in getting outside and interacting with strangers.

"We know that exercise, getting outdoors and socialising are all beneficial towards supporting good mental health. Given this, it is perhaps not surprising that some users of *Pokémon Go* are reporting mental health benefits," senior media officer of the Mental Health Foundation Cal Strode informs us. "Though formal links between augmented reality gaming and mental health have not yet been established, it is good to hear that people are finding new platforms and activities that work well for them."

Likewise there are those who have pointed to potential physical health benefits from the way the game encourages you to walk around and cover large distances in order to hatch eggs. "It's likely most *Pokémon Go* players are not moving fast enough to get the full metabolic benefits of being physically active; research shows we need to be moving at a minimum of a brisk walk, around 3 miles an hour, for at least ten minutes to gain the full physical health benefits," says Justin Varney on the UK government's Public Health Matters blog. "But mental wellbeing benefits and some musculoskeletal benefits are gained by breaking up sedentary activity. Just getting outside, exploring and connecting with the environment and other people is probably having a positive impact on health (provided people remain aware of their surroundings and don't trip over!)"







All of the location data in the game is based on Niantic's previous augmented reality title *Ingress* and Google maps data from when the studio was an internal team at that company. That's how it has identified places of interest and landmarks in the game, but also why some data may be outdated.

see a lot of Rattata and Pidgey spam if trading was opened worldwide. Some people may disagree with me, but the best part of *Pokémon Go* is seeing all these people outside playing with you. Trading locally gives another reason to now talk with those people doing the same thing as you. I'd also like to see more trainer customisations come through soon too."

Likewise Merrick is keen to see *Pokémon Go* double down on the social side of the experience rather than more traditional videogame elements. "I'd like to see more player interaction. At the moment, outside of meeting people and asking 'What team are you?' and other similar questions, there's very little you can do with other players. The only thing is joining in on Gym battles where other players will show up and also attack the Gym. We know Trading is coming, but I feel like there should be more. Maybe make things such as small challenges you can challenge other players you meet to, or something like that."

> "NINTENDO HAS ACTUALLY BEEN TRYING TO ENCOURAGE THIS KIND OF REAL-WORLD INTERACTION BETWEEN ITS PLAYERS FOR YEARS"

Beyond that it's really just about making sure that *Pokémon Go* has a long enough tail of content on the way to keep things fresh. "In the future, I would like to see the other generations of Pokémon added to the game," says Dankizard. "I also would like to see a stronger server. Other than that, everything I could possibly ask for has been implemented. I would like to see the battle mechanics changed a bit but I won't get into that. Let's just say that I'm sure Niantic is working hard to give us as perfect of a game as possible."

It's striking to see so much faith in Niantic's vision for the game, an attitude that seems far removed from so much of the cynicism that dominates triple-A gaming. While everyone acknowledges the shortcomings of *Pokémon Go* as a digital experience, the social experience is what is really keeping us all engaged and playing. Like the Pokémon games of old, it has tapped into a need for completion or at the very least some sense of progression and achievement with each monster that is found and caught. Each one added to our Pokédex is another satisfying piece of proof of our endeavour and tenacity. By moving this experience from the streets of Hoenn, Johto and Kanto to New York, London and Tokyo, it has really helped to ground that emotional response to make it feel much more tangible and real.

And while we wait for Niantic to make its next move, the communities that have risen from this game are already making plans to keep things evolving. "My fantastic moderator team and I have already discussed doing a charity walk and *Pokémon Go* BBQ as well as trying to expand Dorset wide, in the future," reveals Knight. "With the success and growth we've had we want to be able to do some good for the local communities." Dankizard is equally motivated to keep the momentum going for his group in New York. "In the future, I plan on having more meet ups and more involved meet ups. I'd like to get meet ups in which members of the same team can mob together and work on sweeping Gyms. I would also like to have meet ups in which *Go* players can trade and battle, once those features are added to the game. Lastly, I plan on working on getting some official locations for the members of the page to meet up, such as bars and hotels."

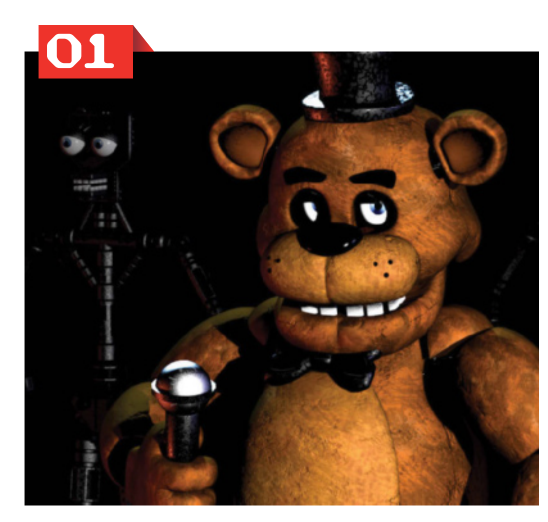
Thanks to these dedicated trainers on the ground and Niantic's commitment to the game in California, *Pokémon Go* doesn't look likely to go anywhere fast. As with any trend it may ultimately wane or be replaced by some other interest, but after 20 years of Pokémon we would be wise not to underestimate this series ever again. The need to catch 'em all appears to be stronger than ever.



20 BIGGEST **BREAKOUT** GAMES

POKÉMON GO HAS TAKEN THE WORLD BY STORM, BUT IT'S FAR FROM THE FIRST GAMING TREND TO EXPLODE OVERNIGHT

01



FIVE NIGHTS AT FREDDY'S

WHERE DID IT COME FROM?:

Designed by indie developer Scott Cawthon and released in 2014, *Five Nights At Freddy's* was a relatively unassuming point and click horror experience for PC. It was a simplified take on the genre, which helped it reach a wider audience than might have been expected.

WHAT DID IT ACHIEVE?:

Thanks to the number of jump scares it managed to pack in, *Five Nights At Freddy's* has become a Let's Play favourite for YouTubers and Twitch streamers. As of July 2015 it was estimated it was being downloaded 4,694 times a day. Since its release it has already spawned three direct sequels and two spin-off games.

02



GUITAR HERO

WHERE DID IT COME FROM?:

Developer Harmonix made a name for itself with the superb traditional rhythm action duo of *FreQuency* and *Amplitude*, using this moderate success as a platform from which to announce *Guitar Hero*, a rock-based sequel with a plastic guitar controller.

WHAT DID IT ACHIEVE?:

While not the first game with an axe to grind (that would be Konami's *Guitar Freaks*), *Guitar Hero*'s superb soundtrack and engrossing rock star fantasy captured imaginations of players everywhere. The band broke up shortly after – *Guitar Hero II* was Harmonix's last gig before Activision put Neversoft on the stage, while the original lineup took its concept to the next level with the *Rock Band* series.

03



CANDY CRUSH SAGA

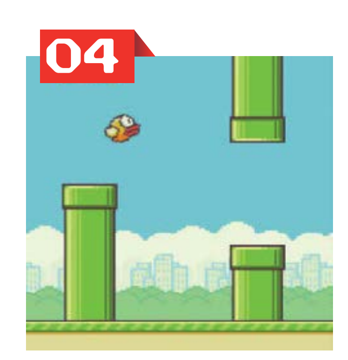
WHERE DID IT COME FROM?:

■ The mobile market is notoriously volatile and hard to predict, so while King's match-three puzzle game might not be very good, it happened to be in the right place at the right time – namely to catch players as they fell out of love with previous mobile sensation, *Angry Birds*.

WHAT DID IT ACHIEVE?:

■ It turned social gaming company King into a household name almost overnight – six months after the game's Facebook launch in early 2012, the mobile version attracted 10 million users in its first month, and King has launched 13 other games since. It must be doing something right – King was bought by Activision earlier this year for almost $6 billion.

04



FLAPPY BIRD

WHERE DID IT COME FROM?:

■ Quite why *Flappy Bird* took off some six months after a muted launch remains a mystery, but take off it did – it exploded in January 2014 to be the most downloaded game on the App Store that month, reportedly pulling in $50,000 a day in advertising revenue.

WHAT DID IT ACHIEVE?:

■ The game itself was pulled by its creator the month after its instant success, with the amusing side effect that prices of phones with the game installed saw a brief spike in value. Countless copycats rushed to fill the gap, and the game could also be seen to have popularised the nauseating 'Verby Noun' titling convention that all modern mobile games apparently must follow.

05



MINECRAFT

WHERE DID IT COME FROM?:

■ Notch's simplistic survival game started out fairly innocuously, although it didn't take long for skilled creators to start showing off their masterpieces. Inspired by these miracles of craftsmanship, the user base snowballed in a matter of months – it broke 1 million users in under a month while it was still in beta.

WHAT DID IT ACHIEVE?:

■ Well, a blocky indie game is now one of the most successful titles in recent memory, with more than 100 million copies sold across 14 platforms. It is even used in schools as an educational tool – kids and adults alike can't seem to get enough.

06



ANGRY BIRDS

WHERE DID IT COME FROM?:

■ Building on the simple physics-based action of Flash games like *Crush The Castle*, *Angry Birds* hit iOS in late 2009, and while not the overnight success story of some of these examples, it enjoyed a steady rise to power.

WHAT DID IT ACHIEVE?:

■ 2010 was the game's year, with the game spending the majority of it riding high at the top of the iOS charts. It has since spawned 12 sequels, three spin-offs and even a Hollywood movie… which apparently isn't as awful as you'd imagine. With more than 3 billion total downloads, it's the most successful freemium series ever.

07



BRAIN TRAINING

WHERE DID IT COME FROM?:

■ *Dr. Kawashima's Brain Training* was such a curve ball that Japanese retailers were reportedly quite reluctant in adopting the 'educational' game at first. They sure were glad that they did in the end, though.

WHAT DID IT ACHIEVE?:

■ *Brain Training* was integral in turning the DS from a plaything for children to a device that offers something for players of all ages. With the game selling over 19 million copies, other pseudoscientific games popped up in its wake, as well as a slew of simple and traditional titles designed to appeal to the newly captured older demographic.

08



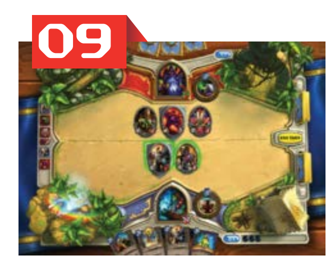
JUST DANCE

WHERE DID IT COME FROM?:

■ Following the roaring success of rhythm action games such as *Guitar Hero* and *SingStar*, Ubisoft leapt into the fray with its own dancing focused contribution to the genre. It had stiff competition from Harmonix's *Dance Central*, however.

WHAT DID IT ACHIEVE?:

■ Aided in large part to branching out as a multi-format game as the years went by, *Just Dance* went from a fairly poorly received Wii game to being one of the longest-lasting rhythm action games from this period. In fact it's still alive and dancing today, which given that it only tracks one hand of the player is pretty staggering.



HEARTHSTONE

WHERE DID IT COME FROM?:

■ Digital card games have been around for years, so it's not as though Hearthstone was particularly original. Making the genre cool and accessible, though? Now *that* would take some doing on Blizzard's part.

WHAT DID IT ACHIEVE?:

■ Card gaming is a difficult sector to break into, one that's been held down by *Magic The Gathering*, *Yu-Gi-Oh!* and *Pokémon* for years. Unfazed, Blizzard waltzed onto the battleground and Pyroblasted the big boys with *Hearthstone*'s simple mechanics, popular *Warcraft* characters and a slick presentation. The game now exceeds 50 million registered players.



DRAW SOMETHING

WHERE DID IT COME FROM?:

■ OMGPop's mobile *Pictionary* wannabe *Draw Something* followed the classic mobile success trajectory – launch, get featured, go viral, burn out, fade away. Still, it was fun while it lasted.

WHAT DID IT ACHIEVE?

■ Facebook integration was the masterstroke here, making starting new games with distant friends as easy as tapping their picture. The craze didn't last long at all, but it was enough for the developer to be bought up by Zynga for $180 million. Sequels and updates are still coming out, if you still care.



SKYLANDERS

WHERE DID IT COME FROM?:

■ The PlayStation trilogy cemented Spyro as one of the great video game heroes of the generation, although this legacy was besmirched by the slew of mediocre sequels that followed on later platforms and it looked like the dragon was extinct.

WHAT DID IT ACHIEVE?:

■ In one of the most inventive comebacks in gaming history, Spyro was reinvented to be the frontman of new toys-to-life brand *Skylanders*. Few could have predicted the monster this formula would spawn, with over 250 million toys sold to date, the series racking up over $3 billion in sales and major players like Disney and Lego jumping on the hugely successful model.



STREET FIGHTER II

WHERE DID IT COME FROM?:

■ In 1987, Capcom released an unknown fighting game with awkward special moves and pressure-sensitive buttons that determined hit power. It was pretty bad. Then, a sequel came along in 1991… and it was sort of the best thing ever.

WHAT DID IT ACHIEVE?:

■ *Street Fighter II* basically established the template for the modern fighting game, in the process becoming one of Capcom's most successful titles and one of the most iconic arcade games of all time. Play the original today and it's difficult to believe that the two are even related.



NINTENDOGS

WHERE DID IT COME FROM?:

■ Any game being codeveloped by *Earthbound* designer Shigesato Itoi, *Pokémon* designer Tsunekazu Ishihara and Shigeru Miyamoto was likely to draw attention, but a dog-focused pet simulator? Originally conceived for N64 and even migrated to GameCube, it finally landed on the Nintendo DS in 2005.

WHAT DID IT ACHIEVE?:

■ While the real-time clock of the home consoles had originally helped make this sim tick in development (similar to *Animal Crossing*), it was the touch interface of the Nintendo DS that turned *Nintendogs* into a world beater. Casual players couldn't get enough of the cute puppies they could play with.



THE SIMS

WHERE DID IT COME FROM?:

■ If you ever zoomed all the way in during a game of *Sim City* and wondered what the residents of your expertly run metropolis were doing in their homes, *The Sims* was a game designed with you in mind.

WHAT DID IT ACHIEVE?:

■ Sim games always had their own niche but by pulling right in on a customisable family and making everything much more personal, Maxis was able to break out of that box and reach a wider player base than EA ever could have expected. The series smashed records, though, now sitting at over 175 million copies sold.



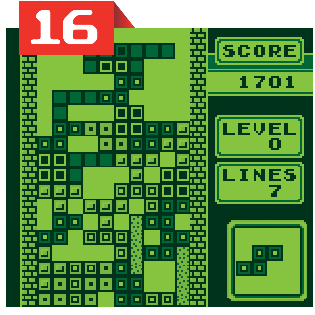
THE SOULS SERIES

WHERE DID IT COME FROM?:

■ FromSoftware used to be one of the most erratic developers in the business, veering wildly from the solid mech shooting action of *Armored Core* to awful RPGs like *Enchanted Arms*. Then, a single game changed the firm's fortunes.

WHAT DID IT ACHIEVE?:

■ *Demon's Souls* released to an incredible response, with follow-up *Dark Souls* honing the hardcore action-RPG formula and going multiplatform to reach a wider audience. There's no question mark hanging over From's abilities any more, and that's all because of the Souls games.



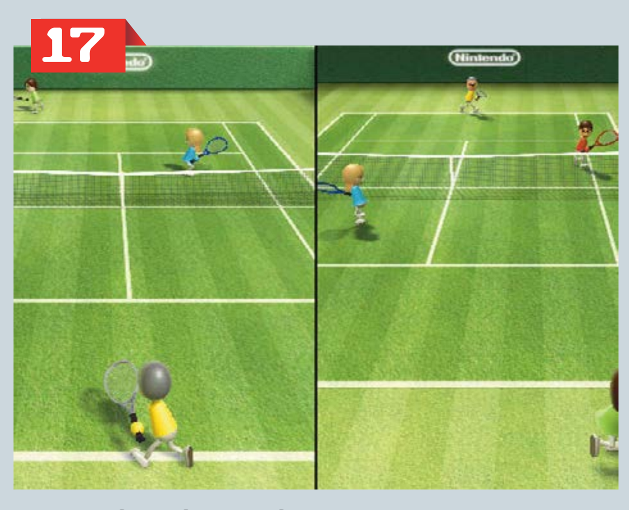
TETRIS

WHERE DID IT COME FROM?:

■ Bundling a simple puzzle game with the Game Boy was a smart move, giving buyers something to play without having to pick up additional software. But whether through chance or design, that puzzle game happened to be one of the greatest of all time.

WHAT DID IT ACHIEVE?:

■ Game Boy and *Tetris* was a symbiotic relationship, the system inherently boosting sales of the pack-in game and the game boosting sales of the hardware. Given the success of the handheld, it should come as no surprise that *Tetris* did 35 million on Game Boy alone, rising to a staggering 500 million when you factor in every different version over the years.



WII SPORTS

WHERE DID IT COME FROM?:

■ A pack-in game should highlight the strengths of the system it comes with, and few have done this better than *Wii Sports*. Many Wii consoles were sold purely on the strength of this accessible motion-controlled sports compilation, and its impact was felt on a much wider scale.

WHAT DID IT ACHIEVE?:

■ Wii's universal appeal made it a huge success (the console, while less powerful than the competition, shifted 100 million units) and everyone from consumers to rivals wanted a piece of the action… hence Sony's Move controller and Microsoft's Kinect targeting the same broad market.



THE MOBA GENRE

WHERE DID IT COME FROM?:

■ In 2003, a *Warcraft III* player by the name of Eul created a mod for the game where multiple heroes do battle on a single map. Others built upon and expanded the concept over time, as it steadily grew in popularity.

WHAT DID IT ACHIEVE?:

■ Seeing the potential in the mod, Riot Games created a game of its own in the same vein – *League Of Legends* launched in 2009, quickly building a gigantic player base while Valve picked up the Dota name to create its own sequel. *LoL* and *Dota 2* are today two of the biggest games around, with over 100 million monthly players between them and tournament prize pools regularly exceeding $1 million.



COUNTER-STRIKE

WHERE DID IT COME FROM?:

■ Originally developed as a mod of *Half-Life* by two fans of the game, Minh Le and Jess Cliffe, the IP for the project was bought by Valve itself and turned into an official release for the FPS. It turned the sci-fi shooter into a gritty, counter-terrorist FPS experience.

WHAT DID IT ACHIEVE?:

■ In an age where mods of triple-A shooters are more likely to be met by cease and desist orders than job offers it's hard to imagine a game like this emerging from a popular FPS to spin out into its own franchise. *Counter-Strike* in its modern iteration is consistently one of the most-played titles in its genre.



FARMVILLE

WHERE DID IT COME FROM?:

■ Facebook games were just hitting their stride in 2009 when Zynga's *FarmVille* arrived on the scene, and it promptly held the top spot in most-played FB games for a solid two years.

WHAT DID IT ACHIEVE?:

■ Its design straddled the ingenious and the obnoxious, slowing progress to a crawl unless you pay real money or invite friends to come help you, effectively advertising the game for the team while filling inboxes with annoying requests. *FarmVille*'s popularity isn't what it used to be (even the sequel didn't really win back lapsed Facebook farmers), but its template and legacy live on regardless.



STANDBY FOR TITANFALL 2

CAN RESPAWN'S RETURN DO ENOUGH TO COMPETE IN THE CONGESTED FPS SPACE?

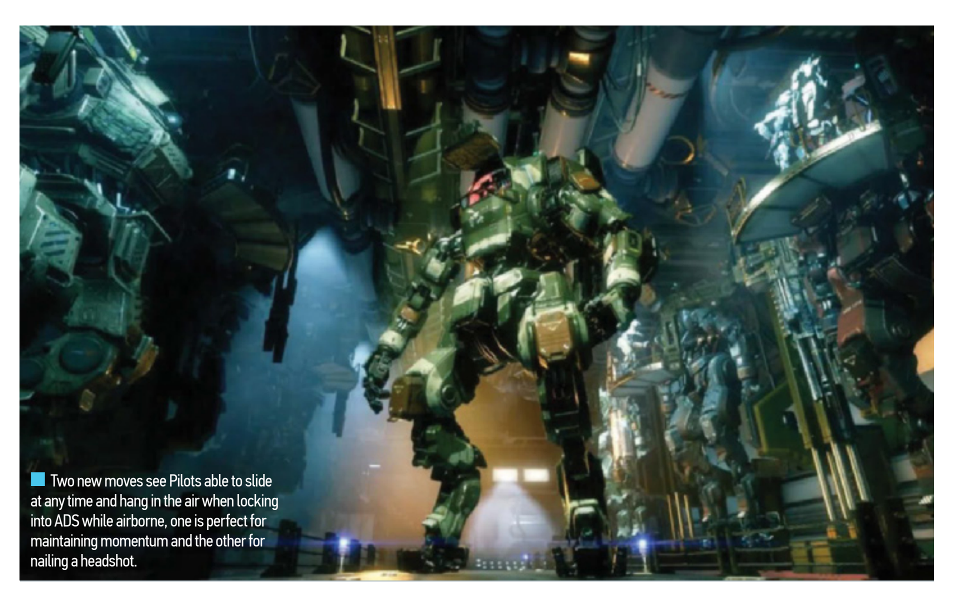


T*itanfall* was supposed to define a new generation of shooters. It shot for the stars, skirting the surface of legendary status before plummeting into the shadowy depths of the Xbox One storefront to be largely forgotten. But Respawn Entertainment founders Jason West and Vince Zampella expected better when it established the studio in 2010. The duo set out to achieve the impossible, to create a FPS that would have as much impact as their most famous creation: *Call Of Duty 4: Modern Warfare*.

But so many others had tried and failed to re-create the success of *Modern Warfare*, how could an unproven and comparatively small studio ever hope to compete in the same space as its peers? It seemed like an impossible ambition, that was, until you took your first steps into the Frontier in 2014. *Titanfall* arrived with style and speed, pitting nimble Pilots and majestic mechs into battle on some of the finest map design seen in a decade. Its fluidity was awe-inspiring for the observer and, for the player, it was loud and chaotic – everything we had been looking for from the genre after Call Of Duty began gradually backing away from genre innovation in favour of tiresome iteration.

If one complaint could always be levied at *Titanfall*, it was that it lacked a tangible sense of tactical depth or progression, but that's where a sequel can step in and remedy the mistakes of the past. Respawn may have other projects in the pipeline, but there was no way it could leave *Titanfall* behind; there's too much unfinished business. *Titanfall 2* is coming to PlayStation 4, PC and Xbox One on 28 October – sandwiched between *Battlefield 1*, *Call Of Duty: Infinite Warfare* and (funnily enough) the *Modern Warfare* remaster – and it's a game that is inherently bigger in almost every conceivable sense. An excellent foundation has already been lain and now is time for Respawn to show the world that it has what it takes to build upon it in an impressive, industry defining fashion.

Can *Titanfall 2* possibly push the shooter genre forward in the way Respawn has always dreamed its series could? We've gone hands-on with it, we've put it through its paces and we've documented the changes, the updates and made note of the early warning signs. We honestly don't know if we can wait any longer for release.



Two new moves see Pilots able to slide at any time and hang in the air when locking into ADS while airborne, one is perfect for maintaining momentum and the other for nailing a headshot.

FEET OFF THE GROUND

DETAILED EXAMINATION OF THE CHANGES COMING TO PILOTS FIGHTING FOR THE FRONTIER

How do you empower the FPS player that has already been handed the world and subsequently blown it to pieces with double-barrelled shotgun? This is a question that has puzzled developers for years, at a loss with where to take the genre following a decade of erratic escalation. But Respawn found the solution: by making you woefully underpowered – surrounded by towering walking battle tanks – you're forced to find freedom and power within the act of movement itself.

The small, feeble looking runners easily tangled underfoot of a Titan or seen bounding across rooftops to escape enemy wildfire; they were the key to the whole *Titanfall* experience.

Thankfully, Respawn has brought the Pilots back largely uncharged for *Titanfall 2*. The game has an unparalleled sense of momentum to it that has a way of making you feel unstoppable. There's a simple satisfaction to be found in chaining parkour moves together across an open space as a battle rages beneath your feet. Sweeping through an environment with a connection of wall runs, double jumps and perfectly timed slides is only made all the sweeter when it ends with a glorious enemy headshot; mastering motion, that's the real magic of *Titanfall 2*.

The game is designed in such a way that you're always moving faster when your feet are attached to a wall rather than the floor and Respawn has made it even easier to get airborne than its predecessor thanks to the introduction of a grappling hook for certain Pilot classes. Six will be in the final game – each with its own unique tactical ability – though the grapple will undoubtedly be the standout.

While the Pilots feel heavier to maneuver, with Respawn seemingly ripping out a degree of skill to make it more accessible [see: Critical Changes] the studio has made some attempt to make sure all players feel like they are making the most of their time as a Pilot – instead of standing by for *Titanfall* to survive.

"There are a few new abilities that allow you to move around quicker, we've added a slide, it boosts

TACTICAL ABILITIES

THREE OF THE SIX NEW TOOLS OF DESTRUCTION DETAILED



GRAPPLE

Used for quickly moving across the map, making use of the verticality and pulling enemies in closer, Grapple is the standout addition to *Titanfall 2*. A swinging mechanic hasn't felt this intuitive since *Spider-Man 2* back in 2004 - and yes, you can quote us on that.

PULSE BLADE

Active Radar Pulse has been replaced by the Pulse Blade, a projectile that carries dual uses. Not only can it be used to one-hit kill enemy Pilots, but driving one into a surface will also provide a brief sonar pulse that detects enemy movement in your immediate vicinity.

HOLO PILOT

Designed to assist snipers, Holo Pilot mimics the Pilot's last move in a surprisingly lifelike fashion. This can be used to send an enemy chasing shadows or could be used statically on a rooftop, leading enemies thinking they were about to score an easy kill into a deadly trap.



Respawn isn't willing to go into details just yet, but *Titanfall 2* will feature a large array of customisation options. A larger selection of weapon attachments and skins is almost a given considering the feedback to the original game.

Alongside an array of returning weapons, such as the Hemlock SMG and Kramer sniper rifle, *Titanfall 2* is introducing a host of all new energy weapons that have impressed during early tests.

> "JUMP SPEED AND JUMP HEIGHT HAS BEEN SIGNIFICANTLY REDUCED. IN FACT, YOUR PILOT SEEMS HEAVIER THAN EVER BEFORE"

momentum and adds to the chaining of abilities. Slide, double jump, wall run, clip and repeat the process to get around faster than ever," Todd Alderman, *Titanfall 2*'s lead multiplayer designer told us, adding, "Grapple is a new tactical ability which allows you to get to specific locations directly or use your momentum to swing around corners." Alderman undersells it, because the grapple hook is the single greatest addition to the game that we could have hoped to see. It can be attached to anything in a map and its application seems limitless. It can be released to assist with wall runs and used to gain access to higher areas of the maps without breaking your stride. You can use it to shift the momentum of a run entirely, leaving enemy players tracking your positions desperately turning heel, or you can use it to latch onto an enemy Titan from afar; repelling immediately onto its back for a quick assault will always be entertaining.

"It's diverse," notes Alderman. "There are a lot of ways to use it, [but the] new abilities now have counter-plays. For instance, a new ordinance is the gravity star: which is this throwing star that sticks into the ground and sucks up enemies and projectiles into it. If you have grapple, then you can escape this instance before it sucks you up and inevitably kills you. So an escape mechanism, speed-boost and also a way to get vertical too."

Titanfall 2 is fast and fun, and we didn't exactly expect anything less from Respawn's sequel. It's still so impressive to see a player take on a machine again and again and walk away the victor. While Respawn has made a lot of tweaks to the core gameplay experience and upgraded the Titans' battlefield capability, it's while you're flying through the air that *Titanfall 2* feels completely untouchable in this year's battle for FPS genre supremacy.

CRITICAL CHANGES

EARLY CAUSES FOR CONCERN

Titanfall 2 still has many months of playtesting and tweaking ahead of it. And for good reason, we've already identified a couple of areas that concern us, particularly in the way that Pilots interact with the environment. To be clear, the game is still incredibly fun – unlike anything else on the market in fact – though some of these decisions may baffle *Titanfall* veterans.

HEAVIER CHARACTERS

In the version of *Titanfall 2* we played, both jump speed and jump height had been significantly reduced. Your character feels heavier than before and that increased weight seems to have made an impact on the over-the-top parkour antics that made the original game so frantic; they don't exist anymore. It's still fast, but a little more tempered.

PILOT VULNERABILITY

Perhaps it's because Respawn was eager to show off its array of new Titans in this early build, but the Pilots felt slightly less empowering and far more vulnerable in *Titanfall 2*. There's more danger and that meant more time looking at a respawn screen. That isn't to say its any less fun, but it's worth being aware of the improved threat from Titans.

BUNNY HOP

This is one of those design decisions that's difficult to understand. Play *Titanfall* for long enough and you begin to pick up some tricks, such as bunny hopping to get a momentum boost – that is to say, timing your jumps and landings perfect to the frame. The pro-level tactic has been removed, which is a little disappointing really.

LACK OF CUSTOMISATION

We're raising this concern now, though it's likely this could change before launch. So much focus is being put around the set classes that we're concerned *Titanfall 2* will suffer from the same lack of customisation options as its predecessor. Grenades can be switched out, but we want the ability to mix up weapons and tactical abilities.

A DAVID AND GOLIATH STORY

INTRODUCING THE NEW TITAN CLASSES

The Atlas, Ogre and Stryder chassis have been decommissioned as *Titanfall 2* brings six new Titan designs into the fold. Respawn has spent much of the last two years assessing critical and fan feedback, paying particular attention to complaints levied against the Titan on Titan combat. As a result, a lot of time and resources have gone into ensuring that there's more tactical depth to clambering into the belly of one of these hulking mechanical beasts. The changes are immediately identifiable. Battling in a Titan no longer feels like a next-generation edition of Rock'Em Sock'em Robots, with each mech feeling distinct and powerful in its own right. "We now have 6 distinct Titans, says Alderman.

"Think of them like Street Fighter characters. Purposely designed for certain playstyles but then as soon as you see them, you know how to counter them. Say you come up against a Scorch Titan, well, I can come at that guy with my Ion Titan and I will know its weaknesses. It's very much a chess match more than a guessing game."



RONIN LIGHT



ORDNANCE Arc Wave
Using his deadly mechanical sword, Ronin creates electric waves that damage and slow any enemies unlucky enough to be drawn into a close quarters engagement.

TACTICAL Phase Dash
Avoid incoming fire by using Phase Dash, an ability that allows Ronin to temporarily phase out of the world and quickly close down the distance between you and your enemy.

DEFENSIVE Sword Block
Bringing your sword up across the hull may reduce visibility, but it greatly reduces damage taken too. It can also be held indefinitely as you await backup.

CORE Sword Core
Empowers Ronin's sword attacks, giving the Titan access to an array of new a melee abilities. This makes him impossibly dangerous in tight streets.

A sword-wielding Titan has been long anticipated and it's great to see it actually make an appearance in the game. Ronin is essentially a hit and run specialist, utilising speed and its high power (but low capacity) shotgun to inflict huge damage before making a quick exit from combat. The danger is mitigated somewhat by its flimsy chassis, with Ronin being quickly brought to its knees by any keen Pilot with a steady hand.

SCORCH HEAVY



ORDNANCE Firewall
Powerful and direct, Firewall sends a directed wall of thermite into the enemies direction. It's deadly to any Titan or Pilot foolish enough to stand in front of it.

TACTICAL Incendiary Trap
These flammable gas canisters steadily leak butane in a small area that can later be triggered by one of your fire attacks for massive damage.

DEFENSIVE Thermal Shield
This defensive ability doesn't hold bullets, but instead melts them as they fly towards you. Also does a small amount of AOE damage at close quarters.

CORE Flame Core
Should you charge up your core, Flame Core is essentially an upgraded version of Firewall and destroys anything and everything in its path.

Scorch is going to be a favourite, this much we can tell. It's a slow Titan with little defensive capabilities outside of its increased base armour. Scorch has no dash ability, which means you need to commit to a fight if you stray into one, while its single shot Thermite launcher ensures that you are able to do as much damage as possible in the smallest window imaginable.

ION MEDIUM



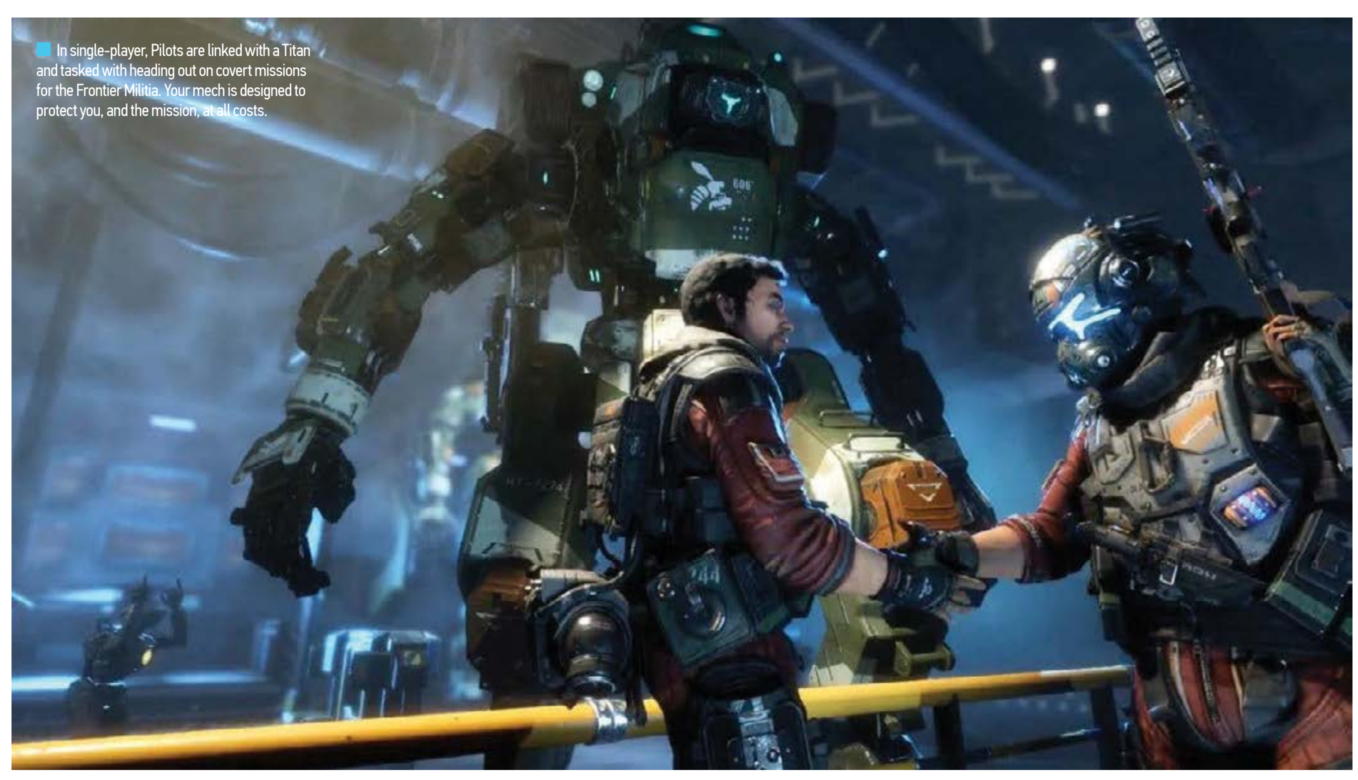
ORDNANCE Laser Shot
A difficult to aim shoulder-mounted laser, it produces a beam that is best used on Pilots as they leap cautiously from rooftops to rooftop looking for a vantage point.

TACTICAL Tripwire
Laser triggered explosive mines do little damage to enemy Titans, but they do prove useful to Pilots attempting to Rodeo you from the ground level.

DEFENSIVE Vortex Shield
Much like the Atlus Titan of old, Vortex Shield is an old favourite that allows you to absorb incoming fire and return it to sender.

CORE Laser Core
Laser Core lets you go full-on Iron Man, unleashing an oversized laser beam directly from your chest cavity. It is both impressive and deadly.

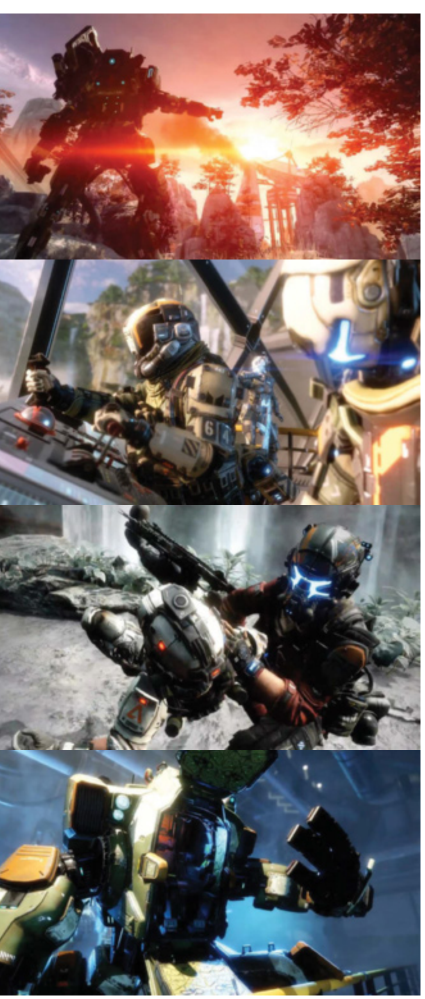
Ion feels like the most balanced and familiar of the three new Titans, handling like an upgraded version of the medium Atlus chassis from the first *Titanfall*. Wielding a rapid-fire laser proves to be useful at range and close quarters, while the returning Vortex Shield means you always have a way to avoid damage if necessary. The Ion Titan is slower than Atlus however, as it is outfitted with just a single dash.



In single-player, Pilots are linked with a Titan and tasked with heading out on covert missions for the Frontier Militia. Your mech is designed to protect you, and the mission, at all costs.

DOES TITANFALL NEED A SINGLE PLAYER CAMPAIGN?

IT IS NO LONGER A MULTIPLAYER GAME FIRST



T*itanfall* was always envisioned as a multiplayer-first game, where everything came together between two teams of hyper-agile Pilots and powerhouse mechs. Why then, is Respawn including a fully-formed single-player campaign in the sequel?

It's difficult to see it as anything more than pandering to a certain (vocal) sub-section of the fan base, those who thought that the lack of single-player indicated a lack of value. This was a common misconception back in 2014; that *Titanfall* wasn't worth the money because it had no campaign to rattle through. Though the market has certainly shifted in the last two years, thanks in no small part to the success of games like *Overwatch*.

But here we are, with a single-player experience set to explore the unique bond between man and machine. It'll let you step out onto the Frontier as a stranded Militia rifleman, Jack Cooper, caught behind enemy lines with big dreams of becoming an elite Pilot and having a Titan of his own. That'll be BT-7274, a veteran Vanguard class Titan with a voice and personality. After BT's Pilot was killed during mysterious circumstances the pair team up and battle against IMC forces to complete a mission neither of them should be completing.

It's funny to think that, for a lot of the development team, this will be the first single-player experience the ex-Infinity Ward staffers have worked on since *Modern Warfare 2* in 2009. That shouldn't, of course, inform the likely quality; though the original *Titanfall* made it clear that the team's expertise was to be found in the chaos of online warfare. And so *Titanfall 2*'s single-player will look to bridge the gap between cinematic action-driven experience and the scale of its multiplayer battles; integrating the AI driven grunts from the online service to ensure the battlegrounds are as vibrant and chaotic as possible.

We've consumed enough science-fiction media to know that the plot is a little by the numbers. There's also the inevitable betrayal waiting to happen when dealing with an AI who has been programmed to 'protect the mission' as a priority over protecting its companion, but we're more than happy to give it the benefit of the doubt. While we would gladly seen *Titanfall 2* release with its focus fully on delivering the best and deepest multiplayer experience possible we are excited to see how it can flesh out the world and lore. *Titanfall* threw us into gorgeous maps and made us interact with an array of weird and wonderful weapons, we'd be lying if we said we weren't a little interested to learn where they came from.

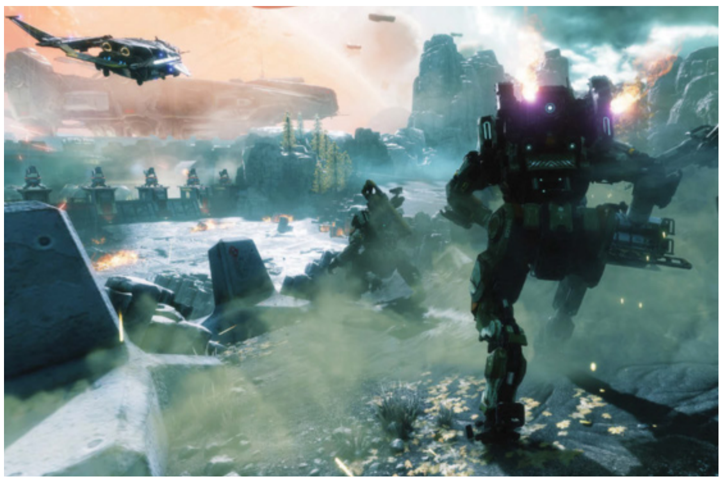
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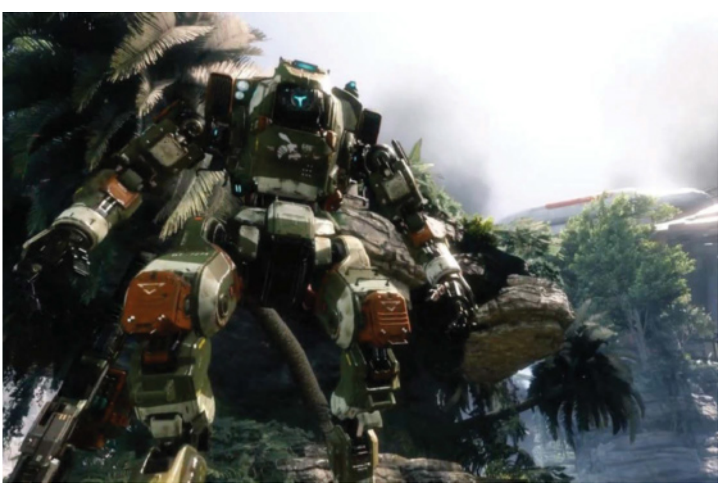
IS IT A CALL OF DUTY KILLER?

Respawn is promising the world with *Titanfall 2* and it may actually deliver. *Titanfall 2* has the potential to change the FPS genre. That isn't wild conjecture either, because the basic game experience is so fluid and fun that it never fails to hook your attention. Like the original, *Titanfall 2* offers a confident blend of everything the industry has to offer: arena-shooter sensibilities, three-lane map design with a ridiculous focus on verticality, peerless control and mechanics that empower you more than any gun or item every could.

Dancing past gunfire as a Pilot – chaining wall-runs, double jumps, slides and a grapple out of danger and into a kill – is one of the most satisfying things we have done in game in 2016. Calling your colossal Titan in from the sky, clambering into its chassis and causing havoc on the ground level is still monstrously entertaining and, ultimately, both of those sides to the game combine expertly to create something unique. There's still a lot Respawn hasn't shown us, we are yet to see the other Pilot/Titan classes and abilities, it'll be how these balance among one another that the game will likely succeed or fail come October.

Titanfall 2 is the underdog going into the battle for superiority this Winter season, but there's a part of us that thinks it may have already won. Players the world over know what to expect from *Battlefield* and *Call Of Duty.* Those games iterate - they rarely innovate, not anymore. But *Titanfall 2*, especially for you PS4 owners, is an unknown quantity with a lot of momentum behind it. That'll only grow too, as a multiplayer technical test is planned for later this year. *Titanfall 2* makes a strong first impression, but if it's anything like its predecessor, it'll only go from strength to strength over time.





FREE DLC PLAN

LEARNING FROM PAST MISTAKES

Respawn is listening and learning from the community and reaction to its debut game, but is EA? It's easy to forget that the publisher controls most of the decisions behind pay walls and pricing – that's one of the reasons we've recently seen Turtle Rock Studios bite back at 2K Games over the state *Evolve* is in. But EA is in the bad books again over *Star Wars Battlefront*; an oppressively expensive and vaguely detailed season pass was not the way we wanted that game to launch.

Thankfully, EA seems to understand that (for *Titanfall*) releasing premium map packs splits the community in a way that is often detrimental to the long-term success of a game. Just look at what happened to the original *Titanfall.* It enjoyed huge success at launch, then DLC severed the ties between the dwindling community before everything (including the base game) was eventually and abruptly made free through EA Access in an effort to keep the servers populated. *Titanfall 2* should suffer no such problems with all of its DLC maps and modes to be released free from the get go.





LINK'S REAWAKENING

The most ambitious Nintendo game in decades

Bounding emphatically out of the mouth of a mountain – from a tomb encased in stone, forged from an ancient science – Link once again finds himself proving the old idiom true: you just can't keep a good hero down. The young hero quickly finds himself standing on the edge of the world; his eyes weary from a hundred year sleep. They settle on a beautiful, sprawling vista quite unlike anything he has seen before across his storied adventures through time. Luscious green fields and forests greet the distant horizon, the calm blue sky unfazed by the calamity occurring beneath its puffy clouds. Silhouettes of ancient Hyrulian landmarks – such as the Bridge of Eldin, Death Mountain, Hyrule Castle and the Temple of Time – cast a long shadow against the expansive landscape; relics of an old world in desperate need of restoration. Link's memory of the kingdom may have vanished, but its legend survives on the breath of the wind.

All of this space is yours to conquer. The untamed wilds of Hyrule that you see stretching off into the distance are yours to explore, its mysteries waiting to be uncovered by the brave and the bold. *The Legend Of Zelda: Breath Of The Wild*'s opener is a stunning statement of intent from Nintendo, it's quite unlike anything we've ever seen from the series or studio. It's an immediately striking moment and the sheer (almost daunting) scale of the world is worth taking pause in. All of this built by long-standing Zelda manager Eiji Aonuma and his team at Nintendo EPD, a group that has long been criticised for failing to stray from the beaten track.

But no such claims of resting on blatant familiarity could be made in regard to this upcoming Wii U and Nintendo NX release, as *Breath Of The Wild* introduces mechanical upgrades and systemic innovation to just about every aspect of Zelda's DNA. It all spirals out of the colossal overworld, some 12 times the size of the one found in 2006's *Twilight Princess*. That revelation may cause some concern, and justifiably so, as *Twilight Princess*' vast Hyrule Field was a hollow façade; an empty void that looked impressive but failed to engage in any real tangible sense. But it's clear that – even at this early stage – this iteration of Hyrule has countless secrets to discover, dungeons to explore and creatures to encounter.





The Great Plateau, an area that represented just two per cent of the total map space, was the playground in which games™ could run wild. A lengthy hands-on session gave us a taste of what's to come when *Breath Of The Wild* launches in March 2017, and it felt more expansive than anything we've seen before from a Zelda game. The tragedies of this land's past may have been obscured by the unchecked aggression of nature, but rich environmental storytelling ensures that there's always something impressive to be marvelled at. It's easy to be left awestruck by the scope of Nintendo's vision and simultaneously difficult to understand how *Breath Of The Wild* has been patchworked together to run on the Wii U.

Exploring led us to stumble upon Shrines, mini-dungeons of sorts, which we were free to enter at any time and in any order – over a hundred of which are scattered across Hyrule. Entering such a locale could reveal unique treasures and items to be used across our adventure, while diving deeper would eventually lead us to a mysterious Sheikah monk – a Spirit Orb the reward for overcoming the Shrine's intricate puzzle rooms, though the use for such a powerful item is still unknown. The usual dungeon-sized trials are out there to be discovered too, though they proved to be far too elusive during our time with the game.

> "Cooking is an abrupt upgrade, changing a principle of play that we have grown accustomed to over 30 years"

That's not for want of trying either, but *Breath Of The Wild* has a purposefully open design. Looking at the mountain ranges and fields; corrupted castles and farmers' huts; enemy encampments and hidden dungeons, it's clear that this game has more in common with 1986's *The Legend Of Zelda*'s design than any of the games that have followed it. While the map highlighted a few points of interest, you are left to explore the open world at your own pace, directed by your own initiative. Whether you decide to follow the story, visit the villages, or head out in pursuit of dungeons is your decision – Nintendo is done with hand holding.

Which makes *Breath Of The Wild* something of an oddity amongst the suite of modern Nintendo releases. It's a difficult game, obstinately challenging at times in fact. Zelda veterans will have no trouble getting into *Breath Of The Wild* – the basics of its real-time combat largely unchanged – though mastering it is clearly going to take some time.

Given the open-ended nature of the game, every moment of *Breath Of The Wild* feels like a puzzle in and of itself. Your control over Link has been upgraded, as the hero is now able to manoeuvre himself around the environment freely with a dedicated jump button. You can scramble up just about any surface too, from trees and mountains, to even the bodies of some of the larger enemies – all of which is governed by a stamina gauge. Link can swiftly paraglide from great heights and even use his shield to surf down hills or slopes, firing arrows as he wilfully skims across the environment.

You could stumble onto an enemy encampment at just about any time and it's upon finding one of these outposts that you'll start to push the game, to see what will bend to your will and what will break it – though *spoiler alert* it seems Nintendo has thought of just about everything. You can crouch, utilising stealth to sneak up on targets; enemies' actions changing dependent on the time of day. You could scale a building and attack from above, pushing bokoblins into a state of chaos as they struggle to locate you. Or, of course, you can charge straight in with sword held high and alert all of the enemies to your presence.

Link is still able to hack at enemies through a press of the attack button, and holding it down will still enable Link to unleash his signature spinning attack, though combat now has a sharper edge to it. It doesn't matter what weapon (or shield) you're holding – be it a straight sword, fiery twig or overbearing enemy battle axe – they will all deteriorate and eventually break. Your sword could crumble to ash in the middle of a battle – your shield could snap leaving you defenceless – forcing experimentation with split-second accuracy. Do you attempt to quickly equip a backup weapon from your bag by utilising a handy pop-up menu (controlled by the D-Pad), or do you make a dash towards the corpse of a fallen enemy and appropriate its weapon? Do you make a swift retreat, using a bow and arrow to snipe at an enemy from afar or attempt to use the environment against them, kicking boulders down from a height to crush everything in its path? Never quite knowing whether you'll have the tools to take on a foe, especially when you come up against some powerful and strange new threats, is genuinely thrilling – as is finding a powerful weapon that makes you a (temporary) force to be reckoned with.

Much like *Breath Of The Wild*'s open-ended design structure and staggering open world, this approach to combat feels less of a nuisance and more of an awakening; it's made *Zelda* feel refreshingly modern. For 30 years, Zelda's combat has revolved around a now iconic structure: at the centre of the experience is Link's trusty sword and shield, beyond that are an array of tools



Despite being canonically left-handed for most of the *Zelda* series, in *Breath Of The Wild* Link is right-handed. Is that because it helps with the control scheme, as Aonuma insists, or because this is in-fact the *Twilight Princess* iteration of Link?



This is a Link that we have seen and played as before; determining which one is half the fun though. Link begins the game by awaking from a hundred year slumber, held in stasis by mysterious Sheikah technology.

This is the biggest world Nintendo has ever created, 12 times the size of *Twilight Princess*' open Hyrule Field. The studio has brought Monolith Soft, the studio behind the *Xenoblade Chronicles* series, to assist with its creation.



THE NX FACTOR

SHOULD YOU BUY THIS ON WII U?

It's hugely impressive that Nintendo has been able to get this vertical slice of *Breath Of The Wild* functioning on Wii U. It's a hugely ambitious title and certainly beautiful to look at, its cel-shaded visuals combining perfectly with the watercolour hues, but right now it's difficult to know what to expect from the final release. The game lacks detail, though it's difficult to know whether this is due to the four year old hardware's noted lack of power, or a purposeful move on Nintendo's part as a byproduct to the art style.

The Nintendo NX is still shrouded in mystery. We don't know what's in the box – or whether there will even be a box, for that matter – nor do we know what the controller is like or what the overall gimmick will be. *Breath Of The Wild* feels like a game made for the no-nonsense hardcore, so we are interested to see how it factors in the NX. Will we be simply be looking at a power upgrade for the game, with the framerate and graphics given a boost by the new hardware? Or will it have to be altered in some fashion to accommodate whatever new hardware innovation Nintendo believes it can make stick this time, not unlike the situation that occurred as Nintendo launched *Twilight Princess* cross GameCube and Wii?

Either way, *Breath Of The Wild* will likely be a stunning system seller for the NX. But perhaps most importantly – most impressively – it's going to be an amazing swan song for the Wii U. This is a game that was announced back in 2013, planned for release in 2015, had it arrived on time it could have been the game that highlighted the promise of Nintendo's wayward home console to developers and players alike – the adrenaline boost it desperately needed. Instead, *Breath Of The Wild* will simply highlight the systems failures: a console with all the potential in the world, it just lacked the software to prove it.





WHERE DOES BREATH OF THE WILD FIT INTO THE TIMELINE?

WHICH OF THE THREE TIMELINES DOES THIS ADVENTURE SLOT INTO?

FALLEN HERO

GANONDORF DEFEATS LINK AT THE CONCLUSION OF OOT

NOTABLE GAMES

A LINK TO THE PAST
THE LEGEND OF ZELDA
ADVENTURE OF LINK

▲ *The Fallen Hero* timeline essentially chronicles Hyrule falling further and further into disarray following Link's failure in *OOT*. We see the Temple Of Time standing in ruin and Calamity Ganon has overtaken Hyrule Castle – a shadowy force to be contained, a threat not unlike the one teased during the fail-state of Link's Adventure. Nintendo keeps referring back to the original *Legend Of Zelda* and how it has worked tirelessly to recreate its famous imagery; this version of Hyrule is beautifully barren, an open wasteland not unlike the one found in the first game, while the presence of the Sheikah is telling. Could the Link we see waking from a 100-year slumber be the one we first played as 30 years ago?



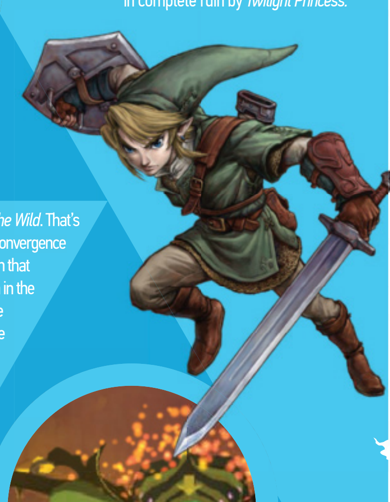
YOUNG LINK

LINK REVERTS BACK TO HIS YOUNGER SELF AFTER DEFEATING GANONDORF

NOTABLE GAMES

MAJORA'S MASK
TWILIGHT PRINCESS
FOUR SWORDS

▲ There is plenty of evidence that *Breath Of The Wild* could indeed slot into the timeline after *Twilight Princess*. At a basic level, the Amiibo support for *Twilight Princess*' Wolf Link is either dysfunctional fan service or a hint of what's to come, while Nintendo still affirms that returning to the game will prove useful for fans of the lore when *Breath Of The Wild* is released. Then there are recognisable locations, such as the Bridge of Eldin to consider, is this the link to the past we we've been searching for? Perhaps, but there are inconsistencies, such as the condition of The Temple of Time. It was in complete ruin by *Twilight Princess*.





CONVERGENCE

▲ Elements from all three timelines can be seen in *Breath Of The Wild*. That's leading many to consider that this new instalment is in fact a convergence of the parallel universes. There has been a strong insinuation that the Link we are playing as is one we have spent time with in the past, so which one is it? Is this the Hyrule ravaged in the Fallen timeline or the one swallowed by the sea in the Adult variant? Nintendo should probably have left the timeline bickering to the fan theorists in the first place, its introduction in 2011's *Hyrule Historia* has only given them more headaches – is this the way they finally clear this (awesome) mess up?



ADULT LINK

GANONDORF IS SEALED AWAY FOLLOWING ADULT LINK'S TRIUMPH

NOTABLE GAMES

THE WIND WAKER
PHANTOM HOURGLASS
SPIRIT TRACKS

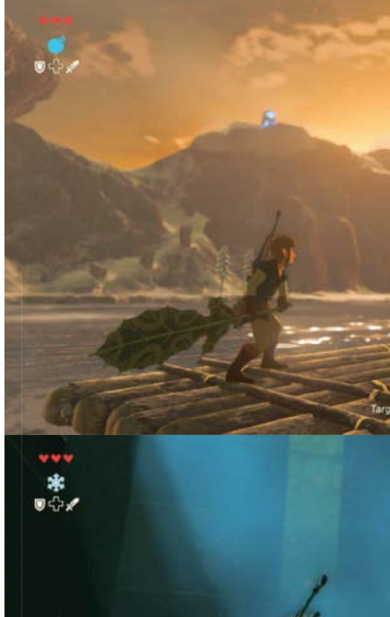
▲ The placement of Koroks and the discovery of an item called Rock Salt in the mountains, that supposedly originated from an ancient sea receding, makes a strong case for *Breath Of The Wild* being set in the Adult Link timeline. Could this be the Great Sea from *The Wind Waker*? Did the evolved Koroks succeed in their plight to rebuild Hyrule after the sea, as the Deku Tree prophesied, swallowed it? Adult Link disappeared after the *OOT* events – leaving a new hero to emerge in *Wind Waker* – could this be the *original* MIA for 100 years? Then again, Spirit Tracks has the hero searching for a new land to replace Hyrule, which seems to throw this theory into the sea.



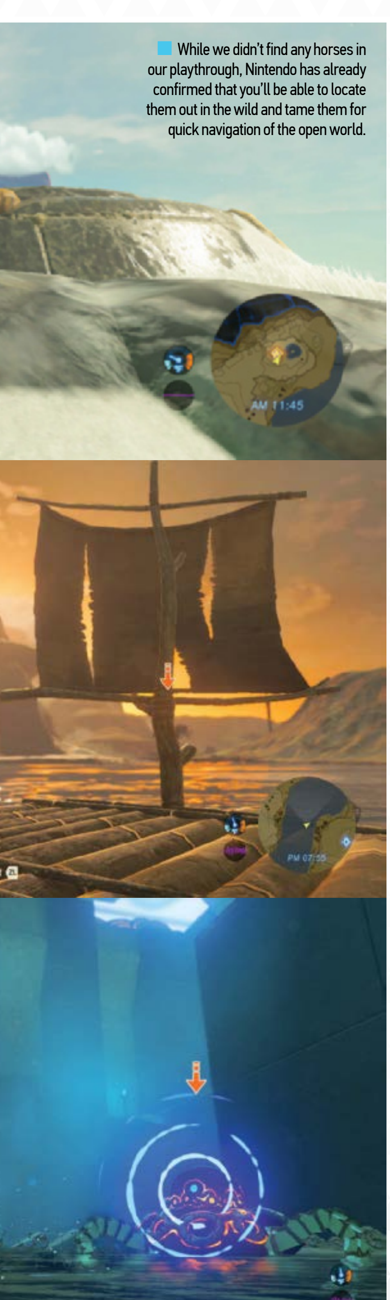


If you want a real challenge, you can play through *Breath Of The Wild* as a nearly-naked Link, forgoing the option to wear any armour at all.









While we didn't find any horses in our playthrough, Nintendo has already confirmed that you'll be able to locate them out in the wild and tame them for quick navigation of the open world.

that you can collect as you progress through the linear narrative that can double up as weapons. Of course, *Wind Waker* toyed with the idea of picking up and utilising enemy weapons back in 2003, but *Breath Of The Wild* is all in; a dramatic and welcomed change to the dynamic.

Every weapon has its own stats (which are incredibly easy to parse), attack animations and durability. It's different, but fluid in a way we haven't seen demonstrated from the studio in some time. It's as if Nintendo has taken the standard found in every other action-RPG currently on the market and simplified it. Increased the fun factor without diluting the inherent challenge such systems impose on a game experience. Basically, it's largely impressive stuff.

These changes also apply to the loot and resource systems too. No longer are you able to slash through long grass to find rouge hearts or break pots to find rupees, now you'll need to spend time foraging and preparing for, well, anything that the game may throw at you.

You are going to need to rely on food that you have found and cooked to keep you going, not only in battle but during exploration too. Fruit can be found and gathered from bushes, while hunting a pack of boar will fill your pouch with uncooked steaks. Enemies will sometimes leave behind other consumables, along with their weapons and armours, that you can gather too. You'll need to find a fire to light a cooking stove, put the ingredients together from the pouch and then sit back and watch through an adorable animation as Link whips it all together.

Not everything will combine to become a tasty meal, though smart assembly of your ingredients will produce hardier meals. Potions and elixirs can be created this way that have application outside of health regeneration. One combo may boost your speed while others will make you quieter, some may even bestow a temporary health boost – increasing the amount of hearts you have is perfect prep for a boss battle.

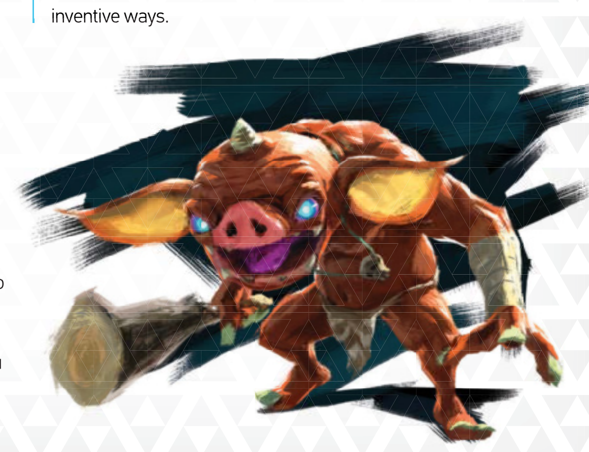
We've even managed to whip up an elixir that provided benefits outside of combat entirely, helping us to further explore new and deadlier parts of Hyrule than we would have been able to with our basic equipment. During Link's time in stasis, nature has reclaimed the world, and that means that the natural elements hold all the power. Venturing into snowy mountains will make you freeze, while heading into heat will also have an adverse affect on your survivability; both noise and temperature factor into how Link reacts (and survives) his surroundings, each monitored by an on-screen gauge. To combat this, certain elixirs will increase your aversion to heat or cold, or you can dress Link up in a wardrobe of different items. That's right, the classic green tunic is gone – or it isn't the standard attire, at least. Take thermal clothing into the snow, you'll stay warmer for longer or – if you are happy to risk putting your weapon away – strike a twig against an open flame and you'll be able to turn it into a torch.

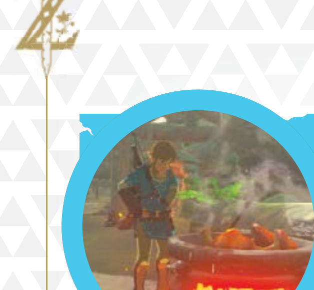
"Every weapon has its own stats, attack animations and durability to take heed of"

Of all of the core changes to the *Zelda* formula being made in *Breath Of The Wild*, cooking was perhaps the one that worried us the most. It's an abrupt upgrade, changing a principle of play that we have grown accustomed to over 30 years. But just like the alterations made to combat, it only helps immerse you deeper into the adventure. The system is far simpler and faster than it looks or sounds – think of it as a streamlined version of *Monster Hunter*'s preparation system. You need to prepare all of the items that you think you'll need to tackle a situation and just go for it. If it turns out you've forgotten something, well, you'll have to find a solution on the fly or die trying. *Breath Of The Wild* starts you off with literally nothing – in shorts no less – and then leaves you to survive; the grassroots survival theme permeates through every new system and mechanic in the game.

Speaking of themes, Zelda games have traditionally been named after a central object or character – *Majora's Mask*, *Wind Waker*, *Ocarina Of Time*, we're sure you get the gist of it. But *Breath Of The Wild* has, unsurprisingly so, been named to pull focus onto the world itself – which means it can be all too easy to overlook the biggest all new addition: the Sheikah Slate. Multiple items and abilities are tied to this new mysterious tablet gadget that also happens to replace a number of **Zelda** classics.

It has basic applications, such as replacing the telescope with the Slate's scope, allowing you to tag enemies and mark points of interest on the map. But the Sheikah Slate can also be imbued with Runes (we know of six so far), and this is where it gets interesting. Gone is the bomb bag, as the Slate can summon two types of explosives (a Round and Square Bomb) into the world on a whim after you've acquired the appropriate Rune, each of which operates with a short cool down and is triggered remotely. There's a Rune for Magnesis, which allows you to pick up and manipulate metallic objects – better still, when you move objects with Magnesis they abide by the laws of physics, it's a very entertaining way to play with the environment and kill enemies in inventive ways.





LINK'S 30 SECOND MEALS

Cooking is an integral part of *Breath Of The Wild*, putting ingredients over an open flame or (preferably) a stove will provide you with game altering elixirs and hearty foods to get you back in the fight. The game doesn't expressly tell you what food combinations will and won't work, but we managed to discover a few Hylian ingredients that compliment nicely.

MEAT & MUSHROOM SKEWER

1 x Steak
1 x Hylian Shroom

Restores three red hearts, perfect for a jolt of health when you need it most.

HEARTY STEAMED MEAT

1 x Steak
2 x Hearty Truffles
2 x Hearty Radishes

Full health recovery and eight bonus yellow hearts, for those occasions where you're facing a tough boss; delightful.

HASTY ELIXIR

1 x Bokoblin Fang
1 x Frog

Found yourself lost on a mountain with no way down? This elixir speeds up Link's movement speed for two minutes and forty seconds, perfect for a quick clamber.

SPICY ELIXIR

1 x Bokoblin Horn
1 x Sizzlewing Butterfly

Lost in the cold without a jumper? This Spicy Elixir warms your body from its core for little over three minutes.

Combat is familiar, though it has been given a tactical edge through deteriorating weapons. You'll now have to rely on swords and shields you find in the world, stumbling across new ones or stealing them from enemies.

It's actually possible to skip over most of the story, if you want to. Should you know where to head, you can take a direct shot at the final boss from the start of the game, though you'll be woefully under-geared and underprepared.

There's another called Stasis, letting Link lock certain objects in time for a short period, perfect for overcoming certain puzzles, though it can even be used as a way to gain momentum; freeze an object, wail on it with a weapon and watch as the object breaks free of its stasis and unleashes a huge wave of built-up kinetic energy. There's one that lets you summon Amiibos into the world, such as *Twilight Princess*' Wolf Link (the timeline is in tatters) and, finally, there's a Rune called Cryonis that replaces the Ice Arrows of old, letting Link create pillars of Ice from water to help create platforms and lift up certain objects. These Runes are clearly going to have a huge impact on *Breath Of The Wild* though we still don't know how many of them are waiting to be found – they are treasures to be earned from those Shrines we mentioned earlier.

Ultimately, *Breath Of The Wild* feels like a huge transformation for The Legend Of Zelda. Much of what we played and saw during our time with the game was hugely innovative for the series, even if many of the concepts are incredibly common in other action-RPGs. The influence of *Skyrim*, *The Witcher III*, *Monster Hunter* and, yes, even *Dark Souls* to an extent, is clearly felt, in both its open world and with Link himself being more adept and customisable. Then again, the influence the original *The Legend Of Zelda* had on the aforementioned games is pretty clear. This is a Nintendo we haven't seen for a long time, drawing inspiration from standardised practises in the industry and streamlining them to create its own masterpiece.

> "Given the open-ended nature of the game, every moment of Breath Of The Wild feels like a puzzle in and of itself"

Sure, *Breath Of The Wild* looks beautiful, but it's the way in which the game ties so many ideas together that it truly shines. From its emergent world design to its intuitive exploration systems, *Zelda* feels fresh and innovative in a way that it hasn't for years. The combat and AI is built to be reactive, always forcing you to be aware of your surroundings and opportunities, and suddenly *Zelda* feels peerless. *Breath Of The Wild* has the potential to be the Zelda game many have been waiting 30 years for, where you are free to go in any direction and to any dungeon from the outset, just to see what happens. Where you are free to forge your own adventure and improve your play experience by learning from your mistakes and experimentations. Imagine how *The Legend Of Zelda* must have looked and played on the NES back in 1986 – impossibly reactive, fresh and innovative. *Breath Of The Wild* is all of these things. It's is a new dawn for Link, his most important awakening yet; the Hero Of Time is back in action, just as Nintendo needed him most.

IT'S DIFFICULT TO BREATHE. The air is thick, unnatural. It's as if years of neglect had forced the atmosphere itself to surrender to the will of the family mansion. The dust of time had left its mark and everything inside had been left untouched; except for what the maggots had got. Yet, in the hours that we spent here alone – clawing at the walls for an escape, any escape – it always felt like we were closing more doors than we had ever opened. Eventually the weight of it all – fuelled by a growing obsession with the unseen – becomes suffocating.

And so you come to loathe the darkness, for you know it could conceal anything. Standing paralysed with fear under a flickering light becomes a fleeting comfort. For if you surround yourself with decay for long enough, old comforts of the homestead begin to take on unnatural forms, the first sign that you are caught in the throes of a panic attack; anxiety onset by claustrophobia. As something shifts

HORROR COMES HOME

RESIDENT



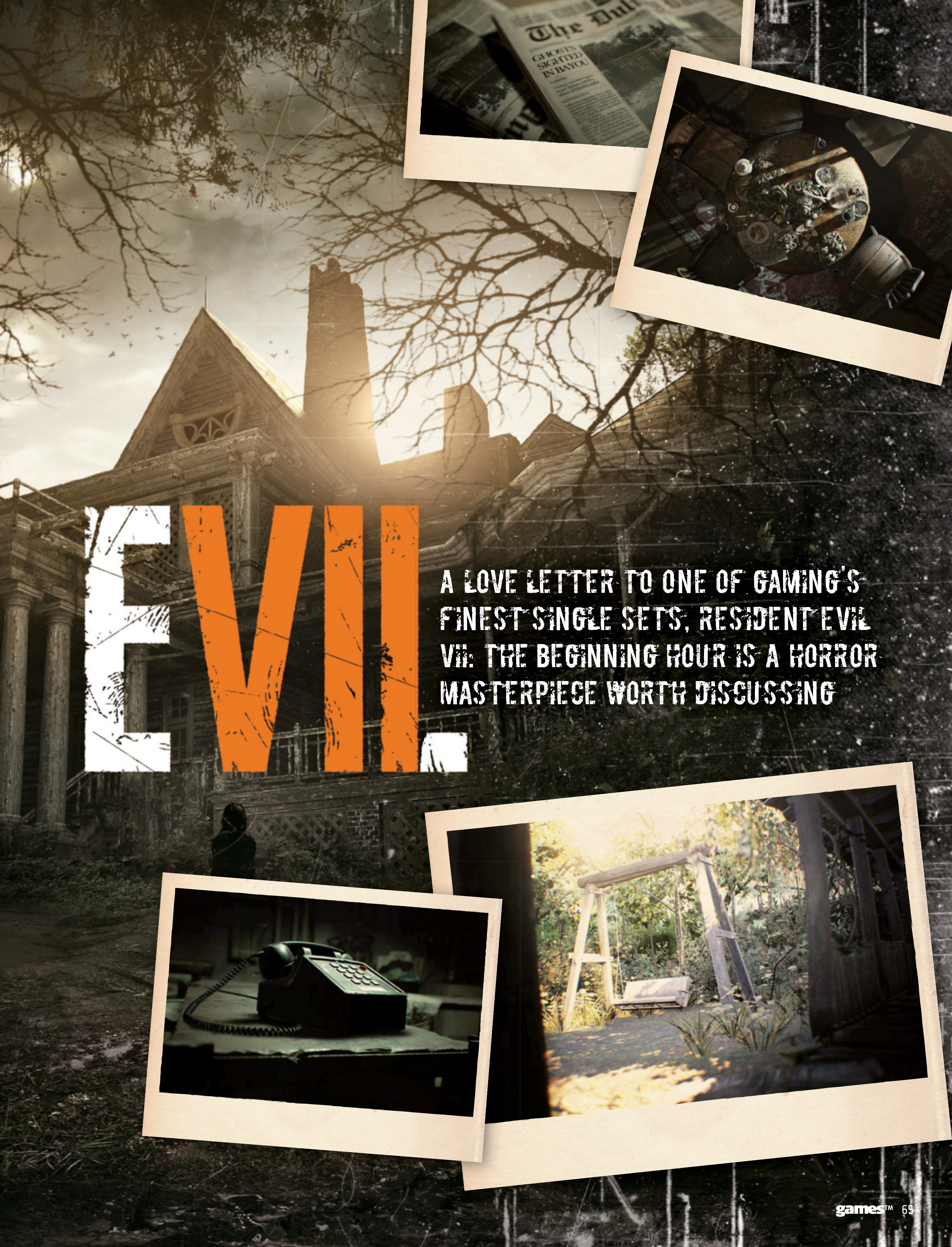


in the shadows, the darkness envelops you. You can feel it coil around your throat, squeezing. Softly at first and then tighter. Tighter until you're choking – tears coursing down your cheeks. You can't fight something that you cannot see and so it swallows you. The best scares should always leave a scar.

Anything but is a mere parlour trick, immediately affecting, but just as quickly forgotten. Capcom wants its scares to be permanent, and so the *Beginning Hour* carves its marks underneath the skin. *Resident Evil VII* plays with something far more insidious than physical violence; you don't have to be a psychiatrist to know that emotional trauma can be just as damaging to the psyche as any weapon crafted by humanity.

The Beginning Hour is a window into the world of *Resident Evil VII*. It employs a first-person point of view to fully immerse you in an enclosed environment, in a dilapidated house of horrors. To immerse is to submerge, and *Resident Evil* does so in style. By severely limiting what you can and cannot see, you rarely have an opportunity to settle. The pressure of not knowing what's behind you (or even a few feet in front of you, as is often the case here) is a powerful tool in the business of fear in an interactive space. The less information the player has – the less space they have to move – the more claustrophobic they become. That's where the mind games begin.

Taking control of the character and the camera, it tricks the player into feeling as if they are trapped inside of a body, shifting from the vantage point of the viewer to victim in an instant. It's the unique interactive element of a videogame that makes this concept work so effectively. Because you too are trapped, in a seat on the other side of the screen, forced to experience the events in tandem with little control over the inevitable outcome. That is where the horror lives and breathes.



EVII.

A LOVE LETTER TO ONE OF GAMING'S FINEST SINGLE SETS, RESIDENT EVIL VII: THE BEGINNING HOUR IS A HORROR MASTERPIECE WORTH DISCUSSING



You are complicit in the action, nauseated by the reaction and still compelled to continue by an instinctual desire to escape. But there is no escape to be found in this minimalistic horror masterpiece.

Capcom isn't the first developer to reenergise a franchise with a POV shift, though it has certainly delivered a playable teaser here that finds success in its simplicity – not in spite of it. But therein lies its genius. It presents a location that is familiar to all, but ever so slightly out of focus. It isn't expressly strange or otherworldly, and at times it can even feel still and sedated. You'll grow to hate that about it – the warped comfort. Though once it's ripped away you'll quickly wish for its return. It's in this constant struggle between familiarity and finality that *Resident Evil* builds such a strong foundation for the future.

The teaser never explicitly states its purpose either; it's an experiment in non-linear storytelling for Capcom as much as it is anything else. The level doesn't expressly tell you a tale; it invites you to find the pieces of its puzzle and assemble it together yourself. You build a narrative in your head, filling in the blanks as best you can by leaning on knowledge of Seventies horror tropes and the *Resident Evil* series itself. In turn you then tell your version of the tale to another person, and they counter with their own. Eventually the picture becomes clearer and muddier all at the same time. Because of this you return home over and over again, searching for a missing piece of the puzzle that may not even exist. This is how three rooms, two hallways and a staircase were transformed into a global phenomenon overnight.

WE'RE USING OUR VISUAL AND GAME DESIGN EXPERTISE TO BRING YOU THE STATE OF THE ART IN SURVIVAL HORROR.

It's difficult to see how the driving factors of this short-form horror fiction will translate into a longer piece, but Capcom does deploy one impressive twist on conventional narrative design that shows promise. On your search through the house you'll come across a hidden VHS tape that you're able to play through, tracking the movements of a ghost hunting crew through the same location some time before. This is where the inherent problems of expanding contained games such as *P.T.* and *Beginning Hour* are exorcised, it allows the developer to create a story within a story – an anthology-like experience that is layered onto the main narrative.

That VHS is a doorway into a different, connected story; your actions in the past actually influencing the location in ways that never seemed possible in the present. New context is given to the locale, new items unlocked and new rooms revealed – and believe us, following in the footsteps of the deceased is pretty terrifying. Drawing on found footage imagery may not be overtly original, but it sure is effective; if anything, it adds to the charm.

Resident Evil has spent the better part of a decade searching for an identity it can call its own. It feels like it has found it within this teaser, a new direction that's not only designed to appease franchise fans and horror aficionados, but to present a new possibility for the future of interactive horror. It's much needed, because we have become largely detached from the innate emotions that drive us – desensitised to fear, sadness and surprise. You can see this reflected in everything, even in the way that we critically consume and define media. For instance, it's common to see the word 'claustrophobic' thrown around whilst discussing horror in videogames – its true meaning lost. But if the onset of claustrophobia is indeed triggered by two key symptoms, a fear of restriction and a fear of suffocation, then there is no better way to frame *Resident Evil VII* and its debut in the *Beginning Hour*.



LETTERS HOME

DISCUSSING THE CONSTRUCTION OF *RESIDENT EVIL VII*'S HAUNTED HOUSE WITH PRODUCER MASACHIKA KAWATA

WHERE DID THE INSPIRATION FOR *RESIDENT EVIL* VII'S DERELICT PLANTATION MANSION COME FROM?

We felt it was the best setting for creating the horror experience we had in mind, as it allows us to create an unsettling atmosphere where you don't know what lies in wait, while being a fairly realistic type of location.

WHEN IT CAME TO DESIGNING THE LOCATION, WHAT FEELINGS WERE YOU TRYING TO EVOKE FROM PLAYERS? WHAT WAS THE INTENT BEHIND THE DEMO?

Our strategic intent was of course to show the *Resident Evil VII* concept to the world as early as possible after announcement, but in terms of design, we wanted to create a scary kind of "ghost house" where the player is afraid to even move forward and see what awaits them. When we designed the location we didn't start out from a 'level design' perspective; rather, we focused on designing a house with a layout that lets you feel people could really live there. That contributes to the feeling that there is a presence somewhere in the house and I think that has turned out really well.

WHAT IS IT THAT WE FIND SO TERRIFYING ABOUT THE IDEA OF BEING TRAPPED IN A HAUNTED HOUSE? THIS IS A THEME CAPCOM HAS RETURNED TO TIME AND TIME AGAIN SINCE SWEET HOME BACK IN 1989 AND, OF COURSE, THE ORIGINAL *RESIDENT EVIL.*

Dark halls leading to unknown spaces bring out the natural curiosity in we humans, where we want to know what lies ahead despite our instincts telling us not to look. I think it's a universal kind of fear and thrill. And despite the fact that we know it's a game and we aren't going to be in real danger, we still feel the terror of that exploration because we are able to immerse ourselves in the situation. This is exactly the kind of horror experience we wanted to prioritise in the design of the game right from the start of the project, and we're using our visual and game design expertise to bring you the state of the art in survival horror.

WHETHER IT IS IN REAL LIFE, FILM OR VIDEOGAMES, WHAT DO YOU ACTUALLY COUNT AS 'TERROR'? WHAT IS THE FEELING OF TERROR?

To me, terror is the unknown, and the possibility of myself coming to harm. Those things are related but not exactly the same, and I think that's why we often fear things we can't understand.

WHAT WAS BEHIND THE DECISION TO SHIFT INTO A MORE INTIMATE FIRST-PERSON PERSPECTIVE?

It was in order to let players experience the terror more directly. Seeing the darkness and mysterious spaces unfold through your 'own eyes' has such a direct way of scaring people.

TWO INTERESTING ELEMENTS FOR US WERE THE HEAVY SUPERNATURAL ELEMENTS OF THE GAME – WITH THE CONTINUED GHOST SIGHTING – AND HOW THE VHS TAPE IMPACTED THE REGULAR WORLD. WILL THESE BE IMPORTANT ELEMENTS IN THE FINAL GAME?

I think the VHS tapes are a fascinating idea and you'll have to wait and see what role they play in the final game! When it comes to the supernatural parts… We wanted to add something a little different and felt the ghosts were a fun addition to the demo. We're not saying the final game will be full of supernatural elements though!

WHAT IS YOUR PERSONAL FAVOURITE PART OF THE DEMO?

I like it when you kick a bottle or can on the floor and make a sudden noise. The more carefully and deliberately you try to move through the house, the more frightened you get by those sudden noises, which I find really fun.

A MANSION IN THE DARK

You wake up on the floor of the family room, your only direction: "Get Out Of The House." From there, an hour-long crawl through the unknown begins. Using simple navigational cues and a selection of items hidden throughout the vaguely familiar hallways, Capcom is able to produce tension and scares the likes of which we haven't seen this generation. The mansion is filled with secrets and mysteries to uncover, and you'll be caught between wanting to discover them and wanting to get the hell away from there. This is how a surprisingly simple design and a committed team can create a short-form horror masterpiece, the items breadcrumbs leading to you inevitable demise.

A LOCK PICK

"A tool for opening simple locks. Breaks easily"

■ If you look between the cabinets in the VHS timeline, you'll be able to find a single-use lock pick. This can be used to open a drawer in the kitchen, which will then be unlocked in the main timeline. It's a strangely brilliant twist.

B DUMMY FINGER

"Part of a dummy's hand. Made of celluloid"

■ Found in a hallway by the staircase in the standard timeline, this is one of the biggest secrets of the *Resident Evil VII* teaser. It looks as if a key is hidden within the finger, though there's no way to use it as of writing – it has sent the Internet wild.

C BOLT CUTTERS

"A tool for cutting chains"

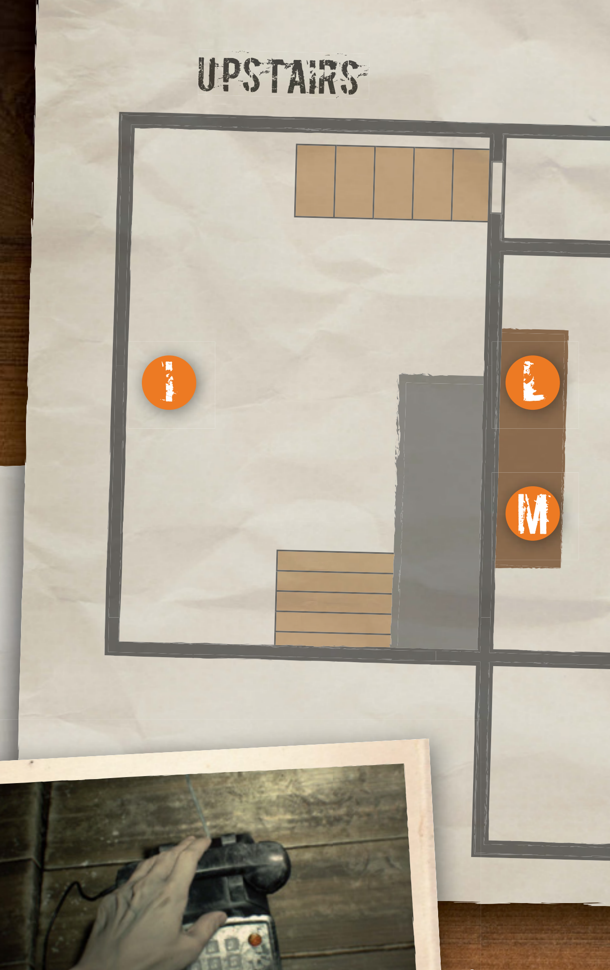
■ The back door to the house of horrors will be locked, but if you root around in some animal carcasses, which is always lovely, you'll be able to find these bolt cutters. They are a permanent addition to your inventory, but they seem to only have one use.

D VHS TAPE

"Derelict House Footage. Dulvey, June 1"

■ This videotape is buried in the armoire by the kitchen, which you can gain access to by cutting the chain with the bolt cutters. Viewing this tape will transport you to another playable section, following a crew of ghost hunters investigating the mysterious disappearance of the family who owned the mansion.







E FUSE BOX

"Requires a fuse"

■ The Fuse Box is found early on and is one of the strongest ties to *Resident Evil* of old. Classic puzzles are returning to the franchise; if you manage to locate the fuse it opens up a new section of the map and, subsequently, horrors to find.

F AXE

"An old axe. It's rusted, but you can still use it to defend yourself"

■ The description on this axe is a total lie. If you used the lock pick in the VHS timeline, you'll be able to find an axe – but you won't be able to defend yourself with it. It feels really heavy though, recalling the visceral melee combat found in *Condemned*.

G BACK DOOR KEY

"Just A Regular Key"

■ Under the fireplace in the Family Room you'll find a secret chain that unlocks a mysterious hallway, you'll be able to find a key to the back door there. It should be a glorious escape, though it actually just leads to grizzly murder. Never trust the easy way out.

H FUSE

"Use in a fuse box to restore power"

■ Found in the secret area in the Family Room, this fuse can be inserted into the panel in the main room. Doing so unlocks a staircase, it'll lead you to an attic where you'll receive a phone call from a mysterious woman, sadly it gives no concrete answers.

I THE MANNEQUINS

"We just don't even"

■ If you head up the secret staircase, you'll find these three mannequins. No problem, right? Well every time you turn your back to them, they move. It's incredibly terrifying. They also begin appearing all around house, and we just can't explain it; trust us, it's bloody horrible though.

J GHOST SIGHTINGS

■ Once you enter the VHS world you'll have seven opportunities to catch a glimpse at a ghost girl. Every time you do, it's but a flash – every single time you will leap out of your seat in terror. It isn't clear who this ghost is but it could be the same girl that murders the film crew in the end-demo.

K WHAT'S COOKING?

■ It's never clear what has been going on in this house, but the stew on the table reveals that the house has long been abandoned and that also the chef needed a cookery book. As soon as the cockroaches start crawling over you you'll be hesitant opening anything again.

L MYSTERIOUS PHONE CALL

"You will have to say goodbye eventually. But will you be ready?"

■ Should you find this hidden room in the attic, you'll be able to answer a call from a person that seems to know more about your situation than you do. Depending on what actions you complete in the house the call changes, which never fails to be creepy.

M UMBRELLA LINK

■ Next to the telephone is a burnt up phone that seems to indicate the house is under surveillance, pay close attention and you'll notice an umbrella logo on the helicopter. This is one of the only concrete links between the teaser and the wider *Resident Evil* universe.

N THE PAST

One of the first things you encounter in the teaser, it's an immediate reminder that it wasn't all death and decay in the mansion. Though on multiple plays you may start to consider that this family – assumed dead and missing – are actually the sadistic antagonists.

O BURN NOTICE

■ One of the strangest elements in the demo is how notes seem to shift and change after you enter the VHS world. This one has blood splatter on it, and it was directly under your nose. What forces are at work here?

P FAMILY MAN

■ Who is the murderous family man? Welcoming you to the family with a heavy-handed punch as you end the demo; a solid guess would make him look like the missing man from the family portrait – perhaps infected with a virus?

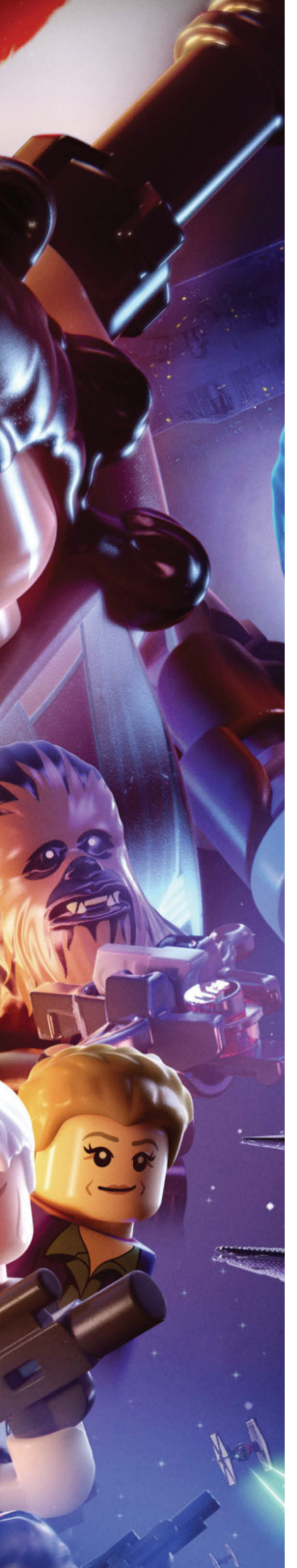
Reviews



74

LEGO STAR WARS: THE FORCE AWAKENS

How does Traveller's Tales latest LEGO experience match up to its long history of success?



THE AVERAGE

Three of the numbers in a ten-point scale are of greater importance than the others: five, seven, and of course, ten. Some publications would fool you into believing that a 7/10 game is average, but that just doesn't make sense to us. **games™** reviews videogames on their entertainment value, and so any title that simply performs to an adequate standard will receive a 5/10. Simple. The elusive ten is reserved for games of incredible, irrefutable quality, but please be aware that a score of ten in no way professes to mean perfection. Perfection is an unattainable goal, and on a ten-point scale nothing should be unattainable. Again, simple. Our reviews are not a checklist of technical features with points knocked off for flaws, neither are they a PR-pressured fluff-fest – we'd never let that happen, and besides you'd smell it a mile off. And finally, the reviews you find within these pages are most certainly not statements of fact, they are the opinions of schooled, knowledgeable videogame journalists, designed to enlighten, inform, and engage. The gospel according to **games™**.













AGREE/DISAGREE?

games™ is always right. But that doesn't stop some people disagreeing. Think we've got a review horribly wrong? Or did we nail it?

Let us know through the following channels:



@gamesTMmag
#gamestmiswrong #gamestmisright





Above: The final boss is one of the worst we've ever encountered, somewhat at odds with the movie's exciting climax.

THAT'S NOT HOW THE FORCE WORKS...

LEGO Star Wars: The Force Awakens

If there's one element from the source material this latest addition to the ever-growing LEGO family absolutely nails, it's the ability to create a new product without doing anything vaguely original – much as Abrams' movie was more or less a beat-for-beat retread of *A New Hope*, so too does TT Fusion's take on it raid the archives for gameplay elements used in previous games. That's not exactly anything new for LEGO games, given that the template has changed little in over a decade, but it's exacerbated by the fact that this is one movie's worth of content stretched out to fill the space usually used for three or more films.

To its credit, the team has pulled in a few elements from elsewhere in gaming that are new to the series, but again, when everything is stretched so thin that there's an entire mission based around refuelling the Millennium Falcon, even these can't really save the game from feeling more like a trudge through the events of the movie than a celebration of its highlights.

Ahead of launch, much was made of the fact that the additional levels would give us a little more insight into the characters and their back stories, although the reality is a little less exciting. One or two are decent (the first, in which Poe rescues Ackbar, is by far the best of the lot) but the rest just feel like playable trimmings from the cutting room floor of the movie, needless and fruitless exposition in a game that already feels padded.

While a novel feature in theory, multi-build – whereby certain piles of bricks can be assembled into several different creations – again just feels like another way to pad things out. More often than not, it's a simple case of building each one in the right order, smashing and rebuilding accordingly while later also dealing with a time limit, because those always make things more fun – even those sections where one build could lead to a secret or collectable fall down on account of the structure previews not being clear, plus some even disappear if you happen to make the thing that would cause you to progress first, which is frustrating. Hub areas tend to fare much better, with their many brief missions and tasks far more varied and playful, to be enjoyed at your own pace and with rewards coming much more frequently.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMAT: iOS, PC, Mac, 3DS, PS3, PS Vita, Wii U, Xbox 360, Xbox One
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Warner Bros.
DEVELOPER: TT Fusion
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-2
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

UNLESS YOU'RE MESSING ABOUT WITH A FRIEND OR GUIDING A YOUNGLING THROUGH THE GAME, IT CAN OFTEN START TO FEEL TEDIOUS

FAQs

Q. IS IT JUST THE FORCE AWAKENS?

Yes, plus a few extra stages made up for the game.

Q. DOESN'T THAT MAKE IT A BIT SHORT?

It does feel a little thin on content overall, which is a shame.

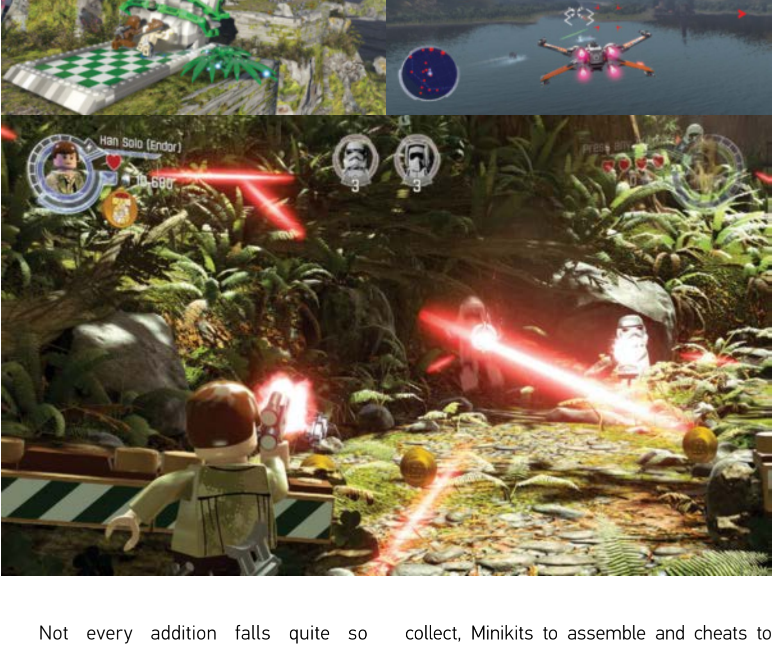
Q. IS IT STILL WORTH GRABBING?

The classic gameplay is all here, but it does feel stretched as a concept. One for hardcore fans.



Right: There don't seem to be as many unique abilities as in other *LEGO* games, meaning it's easier to get many of the collectables.

Below: The system for unlocking legacy characters for use in Free Play is really neat – carbonite slabs can be found hidden away in the various hub areas, which can be taken back to the Rebel base and 'thawed out' to get classic Star Wars characters.





Not every addition falls quite so flat, however, and simple as they may be, blaster battles are a great way to capture the excitement of equivalent sequences in the movies. It's little more than My First Cover Shooter, sure, but it works well enough – TPS pros might need to rein in their habits (basic collision geometry means you can't snipe through small gaps in cover or hit enemies or weak points the game would rather you didn't until later) but with snap-to-target and evolving set pieces that anyone can blast their way through, they're certainly serviceable for a family game such as this. Similarly, returning dogfight sections are simple and effective *Star Fox*-esque aerial battles that don't need complex mechanics to be engrossing, and that do a cracking job of breaking up the usual LEGO template of basic combat and light puzzle solving as you switch between multiple characters. The latter has always been pretty straightforward but here, the majority are absolutely trivialised by having characters call out suggestions or solutions the second the task is revealed – it'll prevent kids from ever getting stuck but it's all kinds of patronising for older players.

Mechanically, it plays almost exactly as you expect/remember (who *hasn't* played a LEGO game at this point?) with the usual mammoth cast of characters to unlock, Gold Bricks to collect, Minikits to assemble and cheats to play around with. It does feel easier than previous games – somehow – and between the Red Bricks that unlock useful cheats being significantly easier to get than ever before and seldom being without a character with either a blaster or a lightsaber, you could probably reach the credits with your eyes shut. Not that anybody really buys into a LEGO game looking for a stiff challenge, of course – it's just worth mentioning as, unless you're messing about with a friend or guiding a youngling through the game, it can often start to feel tedious.

Production values are typically excellent, although it must be said that with her physical acting replaced by a digitised toy leaping around, some of Daisy Ridley's line delivery grates even more than in the movie. If you adore the film, the chance to play through what is effectively the director's cut will likely leave you beaming, but anyone else will notice that one movie can't be stretched to fill a template designed for three – not without leaving sizeable gaps, at least.

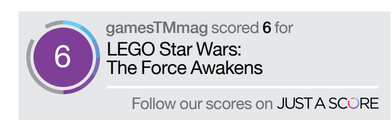
MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

THE WAITING GAME Delaying the game six months or so would have allowed it to incorporate *Rogue One* content, which would have gone a long way towards helping it feel packed like its predecessors rather than padded.

VERDICT

SOME NEAT ADDITIONS BUT THEY'RE SPREAD FAR TOO THIN



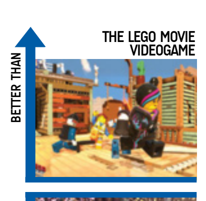


SEASON PASS? PASS...

When one of the main problems with a game is the distinct lack of content, it makes it even more galling to see publishers trying to wring a few extra pennies out of it with DLC. The Season Pass is cheaper than most (just £7.99, which gets you five character packs and three level packs), but we're still not sure this will do all that much to address the issues here – the level packs are said to 'extend the adventure with exciting content not seen in the movie,' which is exactly what the existing bonus stages attempt (and generally fail) to do. We'd be a little more tempted to get involved if the game had online co-op.

BETTER THAN

THE LEGO MOVIE VIDEOGAME



WORSE THAN



LEGO STAR WARS 3: THE CLONE WARS

UNDER THE SKIN

Inside

Have you already played and completed *Inside*? We ask because if the answer to that question isn't either a concrete "yes" or "well, obviously" then you may want to move on to avoid learning too much. Just to be clear, we aren't implicitly attempting to spoil *Inside* for you within this review, it's just that the more you learn about it the less you may come to appreciate its haunting sense of adventure. *Inside* is brilliant, make no mistake about that, but it's also an experience that benefits greatly from going in blind. So, here we go; last chance to turn the page....

Here we are once again. There's a boy, alone in the woods, skirting the edge of death. You are bound by the oldest of videogame traditions, sentenced to ponderously move from left to right; an unknown aggression moves unchecked through a dimension forever out of your reach. Shadow and mist envelop everything around you, the shattered remnants of the environment and thunderous rain your only protection from piercing light and barking hounds. The first time that you are caught sneaking though the undergrowth – your desperate struggle to survive made in vein – you won't feel as if you have failed the game, but the boy. As his blood peppers the muted monochromatic landscape, you'll feel a familiar wrench in your stomach, the feeling of dread is inescapable; you'll vow never to fail that boy again.

But you will, over and over. It is as if you are briefly escaping a nightmare upon death, only you never wake from it. Instead you find yourself stumbling immediately back into its suffocating grasp, each instance of it deeper and darker. That is *Inside*, a four-hour descent into the crippling unknown.

The world around you may look familiar, vaguely human even, and yet it has a way of becoming habitually alienating in the blink of an eye. *Inside* sweeps you away to a realm where it feels as if everything *might* be looking to harm you, though, as you'll discover quickly enough, everything is. Faceless men will shoot on sight, umbilical wires will hang you unceremoniously from the ceiling, dogs will feast on your flesh and creatures from the deep will pull you into the cold embrace of the shadows. We couldn't tell you why, because even after three playthroughs we are still trying to unpack *Inside*'s mysteries.

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox One
OTHER FORMATS: Windows 10
ORIGIN: Denmark
PUBLISHER: Microsoft Game Studios
DEVELOPER: Playdead
PRICE: £15.99
RELEASE: Out Now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

IT'S DIFFICULT TO CONVEY EXACTLY WHAT IT IS ABOUT INSIDE THAT MAKES IT A MINI-MASTERPIECE

FAQs

Q. IS THIS JUST *LIMBO 2* THEN?
While *Inside* may have a few similarities to its predecessor it's a completely different game. One that is, ultimately, better in every way.

Q. HOW LONG WILL IT TAKE TO COMPLETE?
You'll be looking at around four hours for a first playthrough, through expect to spend a few more hours searching for the hidden collectibles.

Q. WHAT IS GOING ON IN THAT ENDING?
That's what we've spent the last few weeks trying to work out! Believe us when we tell you that people will be talking about this for years.







Below: *Limbo* was great, though its latter half never quite matched the raw power of its opener. *Inside* almost has an opposite design, getting better and better the longer you play it.

Below: *Inside*'s visual design is haunting and beautiful, and Playdead should be commended for how effortlessly its muted environments communicate mood and emotion. You'd be hard pressed to find another game that looks and feels like *Inside*.

Inside presents a world where the smallest of comforts will ultimately betray you. Light leads to anguish and silence to suffering; even the rare pangs of music are a symphony of harmonious destruction. You are never given enough time to become accustomed to the world or its bizarre horrors; instead you are pushed forward slowly and erratically. It's an emphatically quiet game, its mystery established through clear observation of a world that you'll never quite understand.

It's a brilliant way of setting a scene and building a narrative – and it had to be, because developer Playdead certainly doesn't waste time with exposition. At its heart, *Inside* is a simple platform game with masterful puzzle design thrown in for good measure, though it could quite as easily be viewed as an expressive visual novel, albeit one without any words, sounds or obvious context.

Inside has been in development for close to six years, since 2010's *Limbo* shipped, and yet the restraint exercised by Playdead is impossibly impressive. The studio has no qualms in introducing a new game mechanic, setting or obstacle and then immediately ditching it before it outstays its welcome. Visual design teaches you the basics of how to jump, climb and navigate the scrolling world, and it's up to you to figure out the rest. The puzzles are rarely so challenging that you'll be stumped, but they are presented in such a way that you'll feel a real, honest to god euphoric sensation when you do overcome any adversity.

It's difficult to convey exactly what it is about *Inside* that makes it a mini-masterpiece, and that's because it truly needs to be played to be understood. That isn't because any of its parts do anything truly spectacular in isolation, but as an entire experience it is peerless. It's difficult to lock down what *Inside* is trying to say, covey or be, and that's because it takes a very real pleasure in subtly shifting reality around you. You'll come to question what you knew about the world and its mechanics time and time again as it forces experimentation and quiet contemplation – by the end of it, you'll wonder whether you knew anything about it at all.

Inside is a rarity, both in terms of its ambitions and its construction. It's from a studio that had a clear, claustrophobic vision and an obsessive plan; Playdead has had the freedom to create, iterate and perfect every single, tiny aspect of *Inside* and the result is as impressive as it is terrifying. We say terrifying, because we can only imagine the headache and the heartache that must have occurred across the six years of development – *Inside* looks and plays like a game that has had every single frame of its adventure meticulously analysed for imperfections. Games just aren't made like this any more.

You'll be impressed by the little details, of course. The way shadow reacts to light and the impactful, yet minimalistic, approach to sound design. The beautiful animations, considered level design and the constant, understated sense of escalation. But they won't ultimately be the parts of the game that you'll remember after you put the controller down in silence as the screen fades to black for a final time – the closing credits coming into sharp focus. Instead you'll recall how you sat in silence for four hours, lost for words. You'll think back to everything that you saw – everything that you did – and consider the impact and meaning of it all, if there was ever any to be found to begin with.

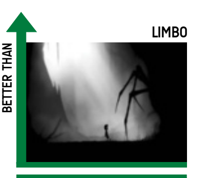
FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

UNDERSTATED DESIGN *Inside* is a quiet, impactful game and that ultimately makes it so impressive. Once it gets its hooks in you, it's difficult to walk away.

BETTER THAN

LIMBO





BRAID

AS GOOD AS



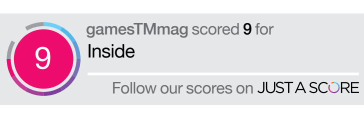


COLLECTIBLES WORTH FINDING

Hidden throughout the world are little generators, rare beacons of light that provide a fleeing moment of safety. They are difficult to find, but well worth the trouble. Not only is each of them tied to an achievement/trophy, but they also lead to a number of unique in game experiences. One such generator leads you to play with a new game mechanic, only for it to be thrown away ten seconds later, others might test your platforming abilities in new and interesting ways. But ultimately, finding all of them will lead you on a quest to find a second, secretive ending after the fact. It's well worth your time.

VERDICT

ONE OF THE FINEST GAMES OF THE GENERATION





Should you get bored of the multiplayer maps (which is likely), of the poor-progression systems (you will), then there's always a stripped back single-player mode to try though it's perhaps more boring than anything else in the game.

A LIVING NIGHTMARE

Umbrella Corps



The Resident Evil franchise may well have shambled its way back into the good graces of gamers with the sensational reveal of *Resident Evil VII: Biohazard*, but many are still haunted by the brand's decade long love affair with bullets and body counts; blind action over tempered thrills with *Resi 5, 6* and *Operation Raccoon City.* Diehard fans are being catered to, finally, with *Biohazard* in 2017 though *Umbrella Corps* is the result of a company that wants to continue banking on action in the interim period. But make no mistake: *Umbrella Corps* is – in essence – the lingering, putrid smell that remains of the decaying corpse that is the modern era of Resident Evil.

And so we are left to consider, what is truly worse? That *Umbrella Corps* exists, a knowingly maligned release that Capcom actually wants you to part with your hard earned money to play? Or that the publisher believed a multiplayer third-person shooter – one dressed in the sordid clothing of Resident Evil – would be anything more than a colossal disaster? It doesn't really matter which way you look at it – *Umbrella Corps* fails at almost every level. It's a masterful example of how to mismanage a brand, of a laboured pre-production cycle and even worse execution.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: PC
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Capcom
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £24.99
RELEASE: Out Now
PLAYERS: 1-6
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

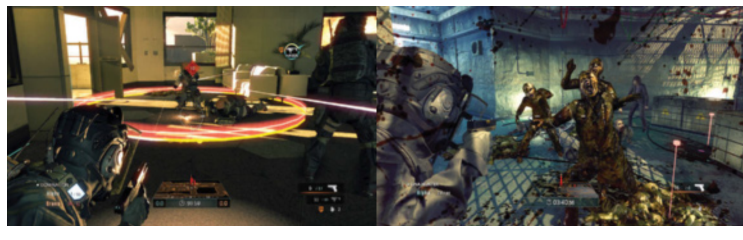
RESIDENT EVIL: OPERATION RACCOON CITY

AS GOOD AS



WORSE THAN

THE DIVISION



As a tactical experience, where your bland, hulking avatar occupies so much of your field-of-vision that it's difficult to accurately track the on-screen action, it fails. As an action game, where the temptation to lock into cover as intended is tempered by tiny maps and poorly placed spawn points, it fails. As a Resident Evil spin-off, where a handful of vaguely recognisable locales and voiceovers seek to tie it into the wider canon, it once again fails. But it's as a shooter where *Umbrella Corps* ultimately collapses – it's easier and more satisfying to kill an enemy with a melee strike than it is a steady stream of bullets; the entire game is like this, a baffling array of basic ideas and obtuse executions.

Across the board, the moment-to-moment action is truly woeful. The weapons themselves offer very little in the way of kinetic feedback, while even the simple act of moving feels weightless and unresponsive. The frustrating core systems and mechanics of *Umbrella Corps* are matched by equally disappointing multiplayer game modes that range from the exhaustively familiar to the disastrously designed.

If *Umbrella Corps* has one good idea, it's to be found in the inclusion of undead on the multiplayer maps. Mindless zombies are scattered about, ignoring you until they are dragged into combat through direct confrontation or other mode-specific means. It's an interesting mechanic that often threatens to spice up otherwise drab encounters – though sadly it's wasted in a frustrating shooter. But that's *Umbrella Corps* all over: mindless, drab and broken.

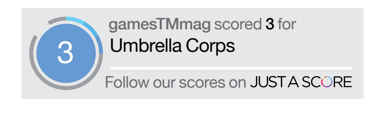
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WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

CLOSE CALL: the camera sits way too close to the character's head, making it difficult to see enemies coming from either side of you; it needs to be dragged out a little.

VERDICT

AT LEAST RESI CAN'T GET ANY WORSE THAN THIS



WHEN IT'S TIME TO PARRY, WE WILL PARRY HARD

Furi

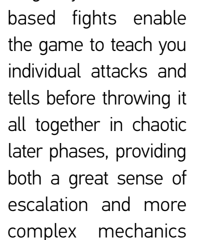
DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: PC
ORIGIN: France
PUBLISHER: The Game Bakers
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £19.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

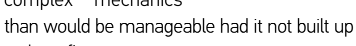
Platinum might be pretty much untouchable in the modern character action field, but that doesn't mean it can't and should not be challenged. Ninja Theory and Team Ninja continue to throw down with the master from time to time, but it's even more exciting to see a skilled challenger come out of nowhere – we saw it with Ivent's *Strength Of The Sword 3* a few years back and we see it again now with The Game Bakers' superb *Furi*.

As a boss rush game, mechanics need to be absolutely on point, and they are. Options are limited – you have a slash, a dodge and a ranged shot (all of which can be charged) plus a parry, and that's about it – but that pushes execution to the fore, with most attack patterns demanding precise spacing or timing as you dance around incoming shots and blows looking for a chance to counter. It's not until the brutal Furier difficulty that you really start to see just how far this system can be pushed, with all kinds of cancels, option selects and buffering techniques possible so long as your hands can keep up. The phase-based fights enable the game to teach you individual attacks and tells before throwing it all together in chaotic later phases, providing both a great sense of escalation and more complex mechanics than would be manageable had it not built up to them first.

BETTER THAN
EL SHADDAI: ASCENSION OF THE METATRON



WORSE THAN
BAYONETTA



FINGERPRINT

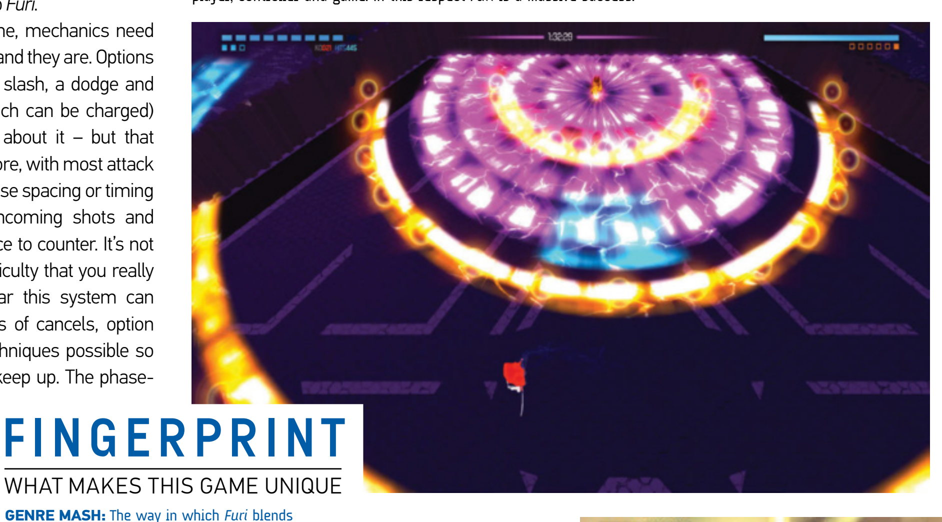
WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

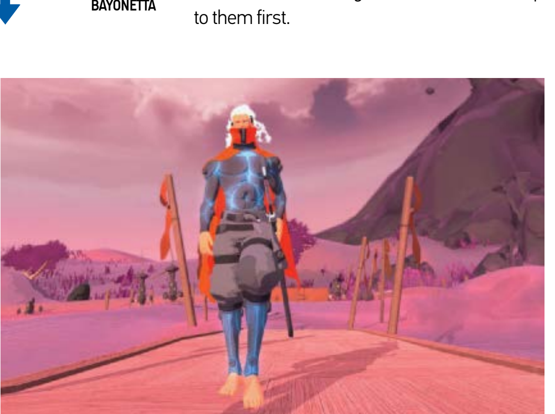
GENRE MASH: The way in which *Furi* blends different genre concepts together is what makes it really stand out. The melee combat is challenging enough, but when it's interspersed with bullet-hell sections, everything becomes more tense.

Battles are intense, then, but what happens between might not be to everyone's tastes – it's literally just a case of walking extremely slowly (or pressing a button to do so automatically) through stylised landscapes while listening to some exceptional music and bunny-headed oddball The Voice spit riddles about the lore and bosses. Downtime between fights is welcome, but this method has proven divisive, especially since these sections can't be skipped on subsequent story playthroughs except on Speedrun mode. Still, the boss battles are exceptional and given how integral they are to the experience, it's safe to say that *Furi* is a stylish and satisfying success overall.

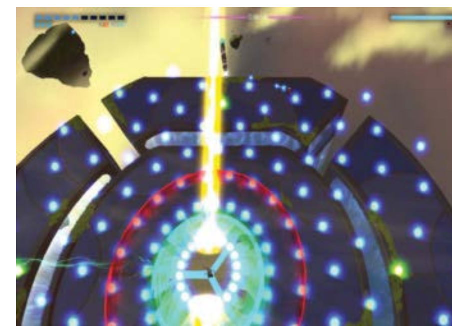


Above: With its very basic mechanics everything is pinned on precise execution and spot-on timing between player, controller and game. In this respect *Furi* is a massive success.





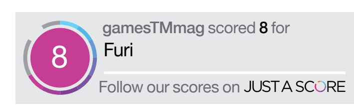
Above: With nods (and even a direct 'special thanks' in the credits) to PlatinumGames, intense melee combat, a killer soundtrack and overwhelming bullet hell sections, *Furi* is a better advert for *Nier Automata* than anything Square is likely to do to promote its niche game.





VERDICT

A TIGHT AND EMPOWERING BOSS RUSH



BETTER THE DEVIL YOU 'JHO

Monster Hunter Generations





If you've ever managed to reach the top of the Monster Hunter food chain by besting the series' mightiest challenges at G Rank, you'll know how rewarding the view from the summit is. You see the creatures below in a whole new light. Every hunter makes their own memories, meaning that a greater spread of quarries and hunting grounds should naturally lead to even more legends for players to write themselves into.

While *Generations* cannot be said to be lacking in that respect, the lack of G Rank content means that it can *feel* like it is. There are analogues in place to ensure end-game hunters can still be challenged, most notably Hyper variants of monsters and the Deviant sub-species, which come in multiple grades of difficulty, meaning G's omission could even be seen as a positive by some – not needing to start over in low-end gear for a third time and sidelining an elite tier that only dedicated players and groups could ever progress through gels well with the new weapon upgrade system, where tools made early in the game can be constantly upgraded to be viable end-game options.

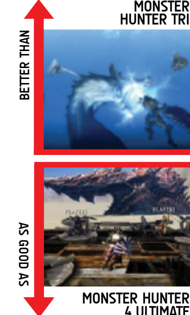
These changes are clearly Capcom's way of lowering the barrier to entry to allow more players to get into what is a fairly daunting franchise. After weeks spent in Freedom Unite's *Pokke Village,* returning to it was a misty-eyed homecoming for us, while returning monsters come with both a warming familiarity and the freedom that so many new options and approaches bring. Variety among monsters is perhaps the best it has ever been, so even those who go into the game without fond memories of their first Agnaktor hunt don't miss out – if anything, they're privileged to have these experiences for the first time at a point when the series has never been better from a mechanical standpoint, rather than having to recall them while glossing over nightmares.

New ways to play are interesting to experiment with, but many combinations of weapon types and new hunting styles simply feel outclassed by other options. Still, with at least a couple of viable combos per weapon class, the system can still be seen as a success, as can Prowler mode, its playable cats are perfect for less skilled players joining group hunts without too much risk. Provided you can look past the fact that the team has managed to spell *Generations* without a 'G', there's mountains of content here and core systems are more flexible and transparent than ever. As both a celebration of the series so far and a rallying horn to attract new hunters, this release cements Capcom's position at the top of the hunting game food chain.

DETAILS

FORMAT: 3DS
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Nintendo
DEVELOPER: Capcom
PRICE: £39.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-4
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

BETTER THAN
MONSTER HUNTER TRI



AS GOOD AS
MONSTER HUNTER 4 ULTIMATE

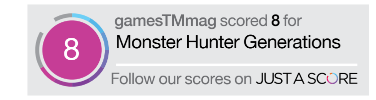
ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

PALICO PLAY: The series' loveable kitties are playable, with additional 'lives' (nine instead of just three) making them a great choice for newcomers.
IT'S THE ARTS: Hunting Arts are special abilities that charge as you deal damage.

VERDICT

THE MERITS OF STREAMLINING REVEALED



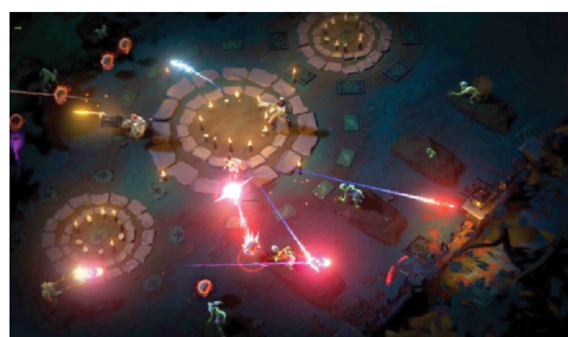


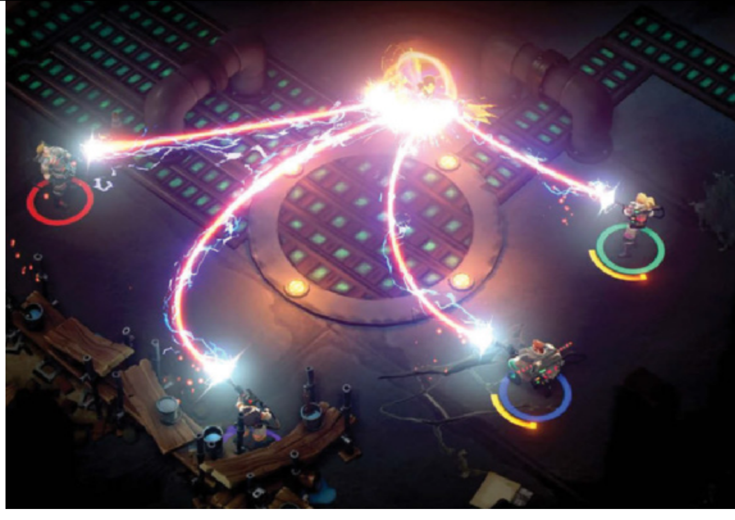
Above: The Fated Four – Mizutsune, Gammoth, Astalos and Glavenus – are all great fights, although the same can't be said of some of the returning bosses. Yes, Plesioth, we're looking at you...



BUSTIN' MADE US FEEL BAD.

Ghostbusters





Above: Ghostbusters, working together. Unless you're playing with the AI, which just seems to do whatever it wants and what it wants to do is nothing. It doesn't even have the decency to get in the way like most bad AI.

Do you like *Diablo*, but wish it didn't have any soul, imagination or a sense of progression? Do you like the new *Ghostbusters* film but wish the characters were flat and lacking in motivation? Do you like boring games that are both repetitive and easy? Well you're in luck! Everyone else: run.

This latest *Ghostbusters* spin-off sets us in the same universe as Paul Feig's 2016 movie reboot, but instead of the film's protagonists we get four nameless Ghostbusters. We would talk a little more about them if they had any sort of personality… But they don't. They do talk a lot though, which could be useful for establishing character outside of the very basic cutscenes. Instead it ends up being yet another missed opportunity. "In yo' face ghoul-friend," one of our 'busters yells – now if the nameless hero had said something like "You go Ghoul-Friend" it might have almost been a thing, not a *good* thing, but *a thing*. See, it plays off the well-known phrase "You go girlfriend!" The ghost isn't his friend; the ghost is the mortal enemy of the Ghostbuster! But surely the action is fun? Well guess what: it isn't. It's a *Diablo* clone with a rather shabby-looking *Ghostbusters* skin, where you and up to three (we want to say 'friends' but friends don't make friends suffer this) people can play together. You shoot things with an Ecto rifle, shotgun, gatling gun or dual pistols depending which character you pick. It honestly doesn't make much difference though, as the guns and grenade options all function in the same manner.

The levels may well be large, but they just seem to be big sections with nothing in them. When you do find enemies to fight it's just the same ones you fought in the last level, all tackled in the same manner. Even catching ghosts becomes dull, cribbing the 'wrangle-and-slam-them-about' system from 2009's *Ghostbusters*. Things can be fun with four players and a lot of enemies attacking you at once, but even that small joy is cancelled out by the fact you won't die because of other players' ability to resurrect you at full health. Secrets discovered with the P.K.E. Meter could be a cool little bonus if the game didn't flash a big image on screen of the P.K.E, letting you know "THERE IS A SECRET HERE" every time. Oh, and it plays the same one piece of music at you in *every level*. Not the original Ray Park Jr classic track, which is looped in the menu, just generic sounding 'spooky' music.

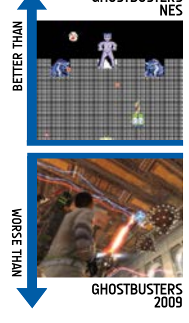
Ghostbusters, unlike its movie compatriots, isn't fun. It rapidly becomes a charmless chore where the only ghost successfully busted is the soul of this game. Would somebody please redirect this call somewhere else.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: XBOX ONE, PC
ORIGIN: USA
PUBLISHER: Activision
DEVELOPER: FireForge Games
PRICE: £39.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN

GHOSTBUSTERS NES





WORSE THAN

GHOSTBUSTERS 2009

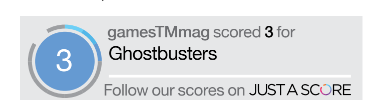
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WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

CHARACTERISATION: The characters are what give the original and new *Ghostbusters* heart and adding any sort of depth to this games *Ghostbusters* would have helped.

VERDICT

DULL, REPETITIVE AND BORING. DON'T BUY THIS.



Above: Does this look like a tough boss fight? It's not! Look at all these different coloured smaller enemies around her, could they denote different abilities? No. They all just spin around and are easily dispatched. As is she.





TO BOLDLY TREAD FAMILIAR GROUND

Star Ocean: Integrity And Faithlessness

If we had to name a series that has continually disappointed us, it would be Star Ocean. Despite its superb *Final-Fantasy*-meets-*Star-Trek* setting, the *Star Ocean* series has fallen flat with its last release, *The Last Hope*, and this new title in the series continues the downward trend.

Like its predecessor, it's not that the game is bad, it just isn't ambitious. It doesn't set out to wow you, yet it fulfils the bare minimum requirements of game design so that it doesn't really offend anyone. This is why *Integrity And Faithlessness* disappoints us: it has brand heritage, it has a seasoned developer and publisher behind it, it has a great premise, which is also its USP; it has all the ingredients to deliver the epic that it promises to be, but it doesn't tap into any of its strengths and ends up falling short and not caring about it.

Its presentation is obviously cross-gen, textures look flat, cutscenes are garish and the game's field areas look like they could easily sneak into the PS2's hardware. There are moments where the game presented us with some neat visuals, granted, but we could count the instances we felt 'mild awe' on one hand. It looks nice at a cursory glance, but the beauty is obviously skin deep.

The superficial nature of the game doesn't stop there. Its combat looks like a decent ARPG setup, with the ability to 'cancel' attacks into one another to maintain an assault on enemies. This, however, descends into mashing X then Circle (light and strong attack) repeatedly and occasionally holding either button down to trigger an ability, ad infinitum. You can freely switch between teammates and cue up skills, which you'll want to take advantage of as playing alongside the AI is more tedious than dealing with a PPI robot, as allies frequently run into harm's way and ignore their own fragile mortal coils.

Thankfully the system supporting the combat is more in-depth. You can unlock a varied pool of Skills by finding tomes throughout the world, and there's the option to unlock Roles, which give you passive abilities. These also script the AI teammates to perform actions in certain situations, but they may as well translate to 'rush into combat regardless'.

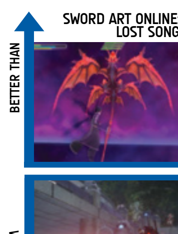
While the majority of *IAF* aims straight for the middle of the road, its story is surprisingly competent, detailing a planet's First Contact event with an advanced civilisation. Unlike most contemporary JRPGs, *IAF* plays this extremely straight, refusing to conform to the mandatory 'kawaiiness' and nonsense that we've seen in games such as *Sword Art Online*. It's just heartbreaking to see such a well-loved series be treated with seeming indifference.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: PS3
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Square Enix
DEVELOPER: Tri-Ace
PRICE: £35.00
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN

SWORD ART ONLINE: LOST SONG



WORSE THAN



MASS EFFECT



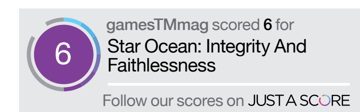
MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

GAMBITS With up to seven characters taking part in battles, you need to trust the AI and *IAF*'s Role system is awful. Tri-Ace, look to FFXII and its Gambits which gave you fully-customisable AI ten years ago.

VERDICT

STRONG PREMISE, MEDIOCRE EXECUTION



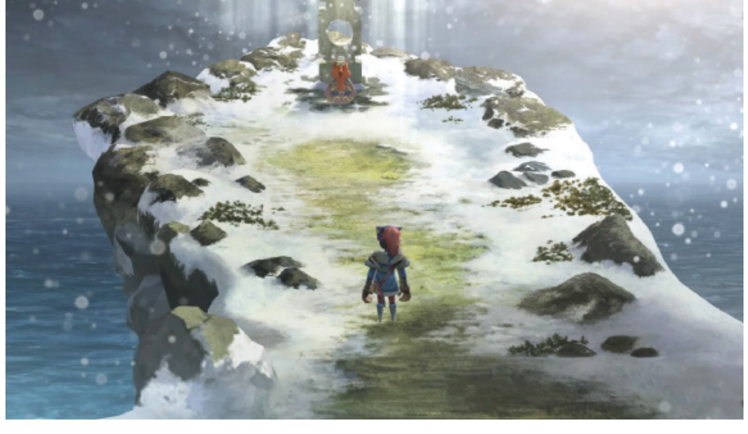


The Burst gauge builds as you defeat enemies and perform counterattacks. The more you build it, the more bonuses you accrue from winning battles – more EXP, for example. You can expend it as a last resort to deliver a powerful attack. It's a neat system.

A HEART, A SOUL AND A FOOT PLANTED FIRMLY IN THE PAST

I Am Setsuna





Above: The art style *I Am Setsuna* is ridiculously pretty. Its mix of watercolours and sombre lighting makes every snow-covered village and tundra-gripped forest feel like something ripped straight out of an old Christmas card. A Christmas involving swordfighting and giant walruses, that is.

Imitation, so the proverb goes, is the sincerest form of flattery. So if the JRPG veterans that are *Chrono Trigger* and the early Final Fantasies had faces, they'd almost certainly be blushing. Tokyo Game Factory's debut game makes its mimicry clear from the outset – and there a few better examples to have on your bedroom wall – but there's a handful of fresh ingredients the new Japanese studio adds to the mix that makes for a satisfying, if poignant broth.

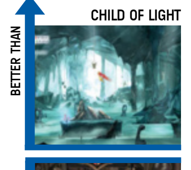
Know this: *I Am Setsuna* is a relentlessly sad experience. Not a crushing one, forcing you to squirm at every moment like a season of *Game of Thrones*, but rather a prolonged sense of melancholy. The fact that your virtual vessel – a masked mercenary wandering a medieval world gripped by a perpetual winter – is charged with protecting the titular Setsuna as she readies herself for a sacrifice only she can offer, makes every fight, conversation and moment of exploration all the more bittersweet. It feels quintessentially Japanese, while still reading like something pulled out of a European folktale.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: PS Vita, PC
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Square Enix
DEVELOPER: Tokyo JRPG Factory
PRICE: £32.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: No

BETTER THAN

CHILD OF LIGHT





WORSE THAN

FINAL FANTASY IX

That juxtaposition runs through every fibre of *I Am Setsuna*, thanks to the mingling of classic JRPG sensibilities with a world that feels distinctly western in tone and humour – as well as a sound soundtrack written by the talented Tomoki Miyoshi and performed by composer and instrumentalist Randy Kerber. That cross-pollination doesn't feel contrived in the way it did with Ubisoft's *Child of Light*, creating a meeting of cultures that's unique in its own right.

That aforementioned use of ATB will tickle the nostalgia glands of fans looking for a dose of old school JRPG sensibilities. All the usual elements are here – combat is semi turn-based, with an ATB metre enabling you to get back in the action as it refills. Combat can get a little repetitive to begin with, as befits the genre, but the introduction of Spritnites and Singularities (crystals and buffs that offer powerful special moves or group attacks/healing that can turn the tide of a battle) help give each new encounter a depth that gets deeper as you delve.

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

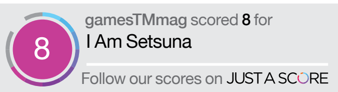
LOOT MINDED: Each attack you finish a foe off with determines the type of loot it will drop. It's a nice touch that invites you to mix up your tactics.

Unfortunately, that depth offered by the battle system over time never feels balanced – once you have access to the core of its features, you can easily tip the contest in your favour. It robs the latter part of the game of its tension, something that would heighten that sadness in its soul were it better calibrated. The save system also feels needlessly merciless in its sparse smattering of save points. Yet for that imbalance, you'll almost certainly be smiling (and weeping) by the time its credits roll.



VERDICT

AN EMOTIONAL, IF LOPSIDED, TALE.





Below: The overworld map of *I Am Setsuna* enables you to wander to different areas in the gameworld freely. There are a few too many loading screens between these sections and you end up wishing enemies could attack at this time as well.



DETAILS

FORMAT: Wii U
OTHER FORMATS: 3DS
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Nintendo
DEVELOPER: Sega Sports R&D
PRICE: £39.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-4
ONLINE REVIEWED: No

GOING AROUND IN CIRCLES

Mario & Sonic At The Rio 2016 Olympic Games

The abiding feeling we have having spent many hours wearing down the tips of our thumbs on the latest Mario & Sonic Olympic escapade is that this series really ought to have grown a little more in the last four years. There are a good selection of events, from favourites like 100m sprinting to archery, but it's all very stripped back and sometimes, a little dull.

The exceptions to this are the Duel events; *Mario Kart*-esque mutations of Football, Rugby Sevens and Beach Volleyball that bring real mayhem to the field. As you kick plasma attacks at defenders or run through rainbows to commence an invincible run up field, it can be quite thrilling.

And quite infuriating of course as the balance between the two is a very fine line, most especially in multiplayer. Playing solo against the AI doesn't tend to offer much in the way of challenge, making the Olympic campaign a little grindy. It's perhaps not helped by the fact that your stats are increased as much by random loot drops as achievement in the events, which can make a lot of effort seem rather futile.

The base game though remains solid, very easy to pick and quite varied in control styles. What this game series could really do with is being a little more robust. It appears to be aiming for family gaming, but just a little more depth would give it more longevity. What's here is good, but not worth running to the shops to buy.

BETTER THAN

MARIO & SONIC AT THE SOCHI 2014 OLYMPIC WINTER GAMES





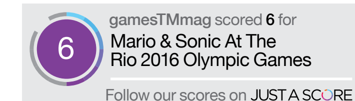
MARIO & SONIC AT THE OLYMPIC GAMES

WORSE THAN



VERDICT

JACK OF ALL SPORTS, MASTER OF NONE





Above: When *Mario & Sonic* allows itself to be an irreverent sports experience it becomes more than the sum of its parts, but too often it's stuck in simulation territory, wasting the potential for some more hilarity.

BLADE RUNNER MEETS CHEERS

VA-11 HALL-A

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
OTHER FORMATS: Mac
ORIGIN: Venezuela
PUBLISHER: Ysbryd Games
DEVELOPER: Sukeban Games
PRICE: £10.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: Windows 7/8/10, 1.6 Ghz processor, 1 GB RAM, 256mb graphics card, 250 MB available space
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



Few games in recent memory have left us as utterly torn as VA-11 Hall-A. It's a game that swings wildly from smart, delicately paced and intriguing cyberpunk noir, to adolescent, boob-obsessed, poorly written nonsense.

And yet we can't help but admire certain elements, as a cast of amusing characters engage in casual conversations and banter that feels about right for a pub environment. When it clicks it can work rather well, it's just it too often becomes distracted by memes and pandering to a web-centric audience. Each character feels nicely distinct too, offering real personality shifts and a sense of full stories behind each of them.

But what's beyond the visual novel isn't really enough to keep you going if the main narrative doesn't grab you. The bartending aspect of the game offers little challenge in terms of mixing drinks, just grabbing ingredients according to a well-organised recipe book. No time limits, no fuss. Very easy. The challenge comes, if it comes at all, when the clientele gets cryptic about its choices, offering vague descriptions of what they want. And there's a well-hidden element of choice playing out too, that will lead to alternate endings depending on how you played things.

Visually we can't fault *VA-11 Hall-A* at all, as the pixel art design of the game is very striking, the characters designs all unique enough to tell patrons apart in an instant. It's a shame that the game remains quite so static much of the time, with little change to the main serving menu as time goes on. That the game is so text heavy and yet is rather limited in the amount it shows on screen can also become a small annoyance, forcing a lot of clicking through conversations.

VA-11 Hall-A is a very mixed bag. It shows a lot of good intentions, builds an intriguing world quickly and has many interesting characters for you to meet, but it cheapens itself too often, lacks gameplay depth and trips up on trying to be funny when it doesn't need to try. There's potential for much more here, but it doesn't get there.

BETTER THAN

MURDER



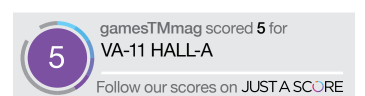
PAPERS, PLEASE

WORSE THAN



VERDICT

AN IMPERFECT COCKTAIL



MAN IN THE MIRROR

Fru

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox One
ORIGIN: Holland
PUBLISHER: Through Games
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £11.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN — FIGHTER WITHIN

WORSE THAN — FANTASIA: MUSIC EVOLVED

***Fru* is a casualty of the Microsoft marketing machine, a distant reminder of what could have been.** Had Kinect taken off in the way the publisher so feverently promised, *Fru* would be received as one of the smartest platformers of the generation, instead it's the swan song of a maligned peripheral.

It may have started as a quirky tech demo, but it has evolved into an experience that sells Kinect as a viable platform for gaming. *Fru* makes great use of Kinect's camera; it captures your silhouette and transposes it to the screen – an inverse version of the world is revealed wherever it falls.

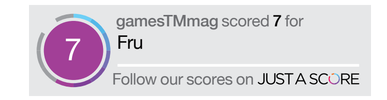
It's here where *Fru* becomes a hyper-intensive hybrid of *Super Mario Bros.* and drunken *Twister* as you frantically contort your body position to fall over different areas of the screen, all the while controlling a character with the controller. You'll find platforms that aren't present in the regular version of the world, you'll be able to mask deadly hazards and close gaps to make clearing the puzzle rooms possible.

Above: In *Fru* you use your silhouette to warp the game world, your position revealing new areas of the world to assist with your characters safe passage in the deadly puzzle rooms.

It's a clever hook, with the challenge escalating gradually until you are both struggling to contend with the complexity of the in-game puzzles and your real-world positioning. You'll look silly while playing it, of course, but then that's half the fun of it. *Fru* has a way of constantly surprising and that's a testament to its smart design choices – though many will likely be disappointed when this relatively short game comes to an end. Through Games has just proved – three years too late – that the device could have worked for games. If developers had been keen to develop experiences around the device and its strengths, perhaps *Fru* would have launched to the reception it deserved.

VERDICT

ONE OF THE BEST KINECT GAMES EVER RELEASED



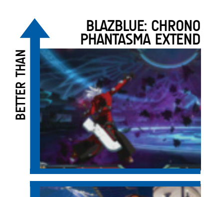
TRY, TRY AGAIN

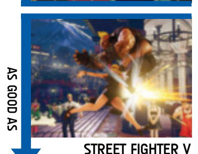
Guilty Gear Xrd -Revelator-

DETAILS

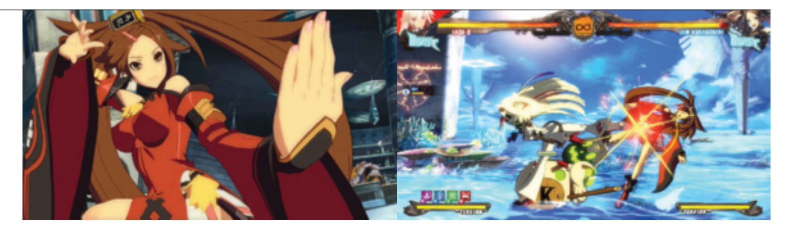
FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: PS3
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: PQube
DEVELOPER: Arc System Works
PRICE: £39.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-2
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

BETTER THAN — BLAZBLUE: CHRONO PHANTASMA EXTEND





AS GOOD AS — STREET FIGHTER V



Above: Even a good two years after we first saw *-SIGN-*, the gorgeous 3D visuals masquerading as 2D art still constantly find new ways to floor us. It's easy to forget it's even 3D until the camera pans and zooms for certain special attacks.

If *Street Fighter V*'s modest spread of modes and options left early adopters feeling short-changed, *Revelator* can be seen as the polar opposite – a cel-shaded Santa Claus barrelling onto the scene after one too many sherries for his grasp of the Gregorian calendar system to hold up. A feature-packed update to *-SIGN-*, there are new toys galore for everyone to play with here, from brand new characters and returning staples to enhanced tutorials and trials as well as a whole new slab of beautiful nonsense in its story mode.

Whatever you want when you pick up a new fighter, you can pretty much rest assured that you'll be able to find it with little more than a spot of menu mining.

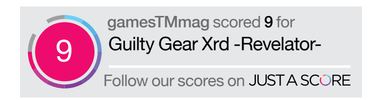
Just as Lab Zero did with the most recent *Skullgirls* releases, ArcSys has presented *Revelator* as not just a shiny new fighting game, but a perfect gateway into the genre for anyone that still feels out of their depth when they pick up a stick or join a lobby. The tutorial here is excellent, employing practical applications of the many tech tools at your disposal and lessons in execution that will serve students well in far more than just this one game. Those who just want to jump straight into a ruck are just as well catered for, however, and it's not nearly as brain-meltingly complex as it can first appear – behind the somewhat abstract button layout lies a fairly straightforward system of combos, specials, cancels and supers, one made even more accessible via the addition of the Stylish mode option that lets you mash your way to flashy combos at the cost of taking additional damage.

As if the roster wasn't diverse enough before, the new additions take this to the extreme. Jam's rushdown style and chargeable, chainable special make her relatively simple to get a feel for while at the other end of the spectrum, Jack-O's complex system of building and manipulating bases that spawn ghosts makes the game feel almost more like an RTS than a fighter.

Despite stiff competition from *SFV*, *MKX* and a bunch of other great beat-'em-ups, *Revelator* makes a rock-solid case for consideration as the best fighter of this generation so far.

VERDICT

HEAVEN OR HELL? HEAVEN ALL THE WAY





"I played the original XCOM for years after it was released, it is probably my favourite game of all time"
CHUCK OSIEJA, CREATIVE DIRECTOR, THE COALITION

WHY I ❤...

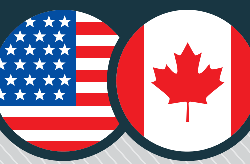
UFO: ENEMY UNKNOWN

CHUCK OSIEJA
CREATIVE DIRECTOR, THE COALITION

"The original XCOM – it is just one of my favourite games. I just love the strategy aspect of it, combined with the management. You know, where do you put your resources, how do you approach each situation? I love the fact that it was turn-based, to me that was really interesting at the time. I think Firaxis did an amazing job with the new ones, I never thought anybody would be able to duplicate it – and I was super-thrilled when they did – but I played the original XCOM for years after it was released. It is probably my favourite game of all time."


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NO.177

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HOW EA MADE SEGA SCREAM

ACCORDING TO TRIP HAWKINS, EA PLAYED A DEVIOUS GAME IN ITS BID TO WORK WITH SEGA

TRIP HAWKINS IS a confident man. He describes himself as an innovator as well as an entrepreneur and he's certainly not someone who would shy away from taking a risk. When he got wind in 1987 that Sega was looking to make a new console, he could have overlooked it, given Nintendo had some 90 per cent of the market and Sega's 8-bit Master System had failed to take off in the way it had hoped. But he didn't. He made a determined effort to get involved and he effectively turned his company – Electronics Arts – on its head in order to do so.

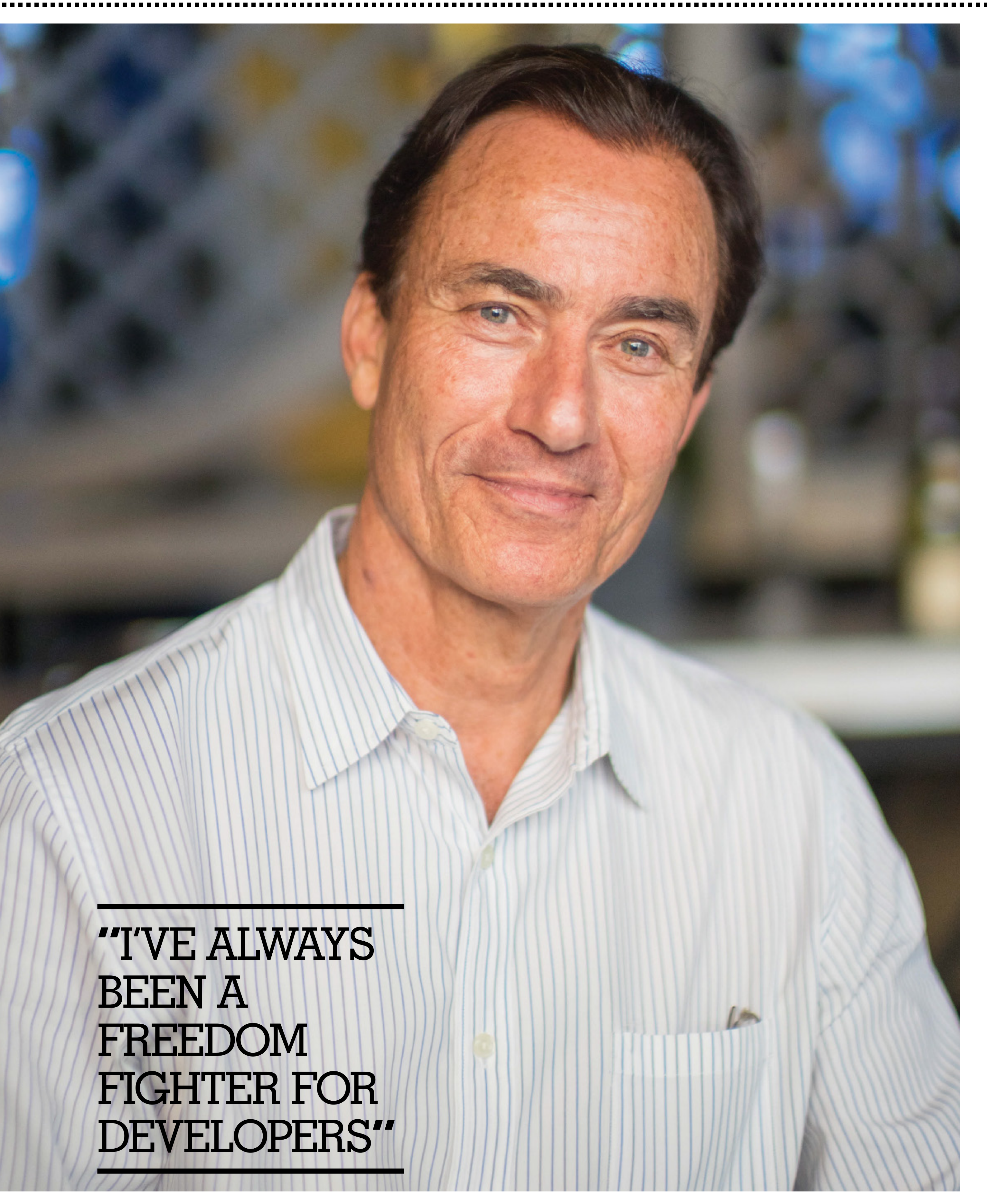
EA was founded in May 1982 and it set out to do things its own way from the start. The company was positioned as a gaming equivalent of a record label and Hawkins treated individual developers as stars. "I've always been a freedom fighter for developers, perhaps more so than anybody else in the history of the industry," Hawkins says. "I cared about how the customer could have a better experience and I wanted to enable developers to flourish and have more freedom and capacity to create."

> "I WAS LOOKING AT THIS SITUATION AND THINKING, 'NINTENDO IS WINNING, WHAT DO WE DO NOW?'"
> Trip Hawkins

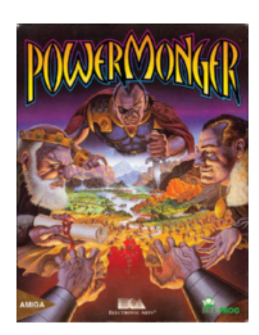
His company therefore became an attractive publisher to work with and it flourished over the course of the next few years. But even though everything was going well in the home computer market, it was becoming more and more difficult for Hawkins to ignore the growing impact of the consoles. For while the videogame crash in 1982 had dented Atari's ambitions to a degree, Nintendo's launch of the NES in Japan in 1983 had begun gathering momentum and it was blowing the competition away.

Hawkins didn't much care for consoles. "We were making computer games and the console market was closed," he says. "The first generation involved Atari and it didn't allow third-party developers, period. Every game for the Atari was made by Atari until Activision broke ranks in 1979." It was very different on home computers, though. EA could produce floppy discs and cassettes whenever it wanted and there was no question of any revenue share with the manufacturers of the machines.

"So can you imagine what it felt like when Nintendo came along and said, 'okay, here's the deal – you have to give us a third of your revenue, you only get to make five games a year, we have to approve the games, you have to let us manufacture the games and then you have to let us



"I'VE ALWAYS BEEN A FREEDOM FIGHTER FOR DEVELOPERS"



■ EA had deals with many top developers including Bullfrog which enabled it to amass a large library of games for the Mega Drive.

put the cartridges on a boat and they will take a month to reach your country, after which time God help you if you are able to sell these things when you find the industry has shifted'?" Hawkins says, barely pausing for breath.

Far from embracing Nintendo, the West largely decided to sit things out. "Nobody really jumped on the Nintendo bandwagon," Hawkins says, "so when Nintendo succeeded, it was not only shock and awe, but an incredibly disruptive thing to see happening. Because, oh my God, if Nintendo takes over, we're all going to be slaves working for Nintendo." The unfolding situation in the mid-to-late Eighties prompted Hawkins to have a fresh look at the console market. "We had hoped Nintendo would just go away but it didn't," Hawkins said.

The only thing Hawkins knew for certain was that he didn't want EA to produce games for the NES. "Nintendo was a step backwards for us: we felt it was prolonging 8-bit and it had minimal sound and graphic capabilities compared to the Amiga," Hawkins explains. "It was also restricted to cartridges which cost $10 to $20 to manufacture. We didn't want fixed upfront costs for manufacturing; inventory left over that would have to be buried in the Arizona desert."

It was then that he began to do lots of research. "I was looking at this situation and thinking, 'Nintendo is winning, what do we do now?'. I'm thinking that I would go around and talk to hardware and operating companies to find out what their plans are and it was during this time that I heard Sega was bringing out a 16-bit machine based on the Motorola 68000 processor which was used in the Apple, Amiga and Atari ST computers." This news intrigued Hawkins immensely.

Sega hadn't been very successful in the console market up to this point. The Master System had been squarely beaten by the NES in most parts of the world and while it had fared well in Europe and brilliantly in Brazil, most industry watchers saw it as an also-ran. But Hawkins felt he had to at least get involved with one of the consoles and he felt Sega would get it right this time around. He knew the processor well and he completely believed Sega's pedigree in arcade gaming would stand it in good stead.

"I thought about how we could help Sega but have freedom and I also thought about what would be beyond that – I felt we really had to get off cartridges," he says. "So I said to myself, ok, here's a stepping stone: we can fulfil the potential of 16-bit, see it become affordable and gain multimedia features and then jump to 3D graphics and CD technology. I wanted to bet heavy on the Sega Genesis but plan ahead." First and foremost, though, a way in had to be devised.

It was then Hawkins noticed an intriguing development. Tengen, a publisher and developer created by Atari Games, had tried to negotiate a less restrictive license from Nintendo. But when talks failed, it looked to bypass the NES's 10NES lock-out chip so that it could publish without permission. This led to a series of lawsuits over many years but it enabled Tengen to launch unlicensed games.

"THERE IS TREMENDOUS HEROISM INVOLVED IN A REVERSE-ENGINEER JOB"
Trip Hawkins

"What I heard about Tengen got me thinking," Hawkins explains. "So I studied the situation and thought, ok, you can legally reverse-engineer something but you're probably going to be be sued for trademark, copyright or patent infringement." Knowing Nintendo did indeed have a patent on its lock-out chip, he decided to turn his attention exclusively to Sega which was more of an unknown entity.

"The thing with Sega was we didn't know the platform and we didn't know if they had patents like Nintendo and we didn't know if we would reverse-engineer it," Hawkins continues. "But [what we did know was that] it was going to come to market fairly soon and be a couple of years ahead of whenever Nintendo got round to making a 16-bit machine. So it had a shot at early market leadership in 16-bit console." It was worth the gamble.



■ Sports titles such as *John Madden Football* helped to boost Sega's consoles massively.



■ Sadly, *Mutant League Hockey* is not a title that has survived the generational leaps.



■ Sega had wanted to turn to sports simulations as a way of differentiating its output from Nintendo, and EA was only too happy to oblige.



■ *Road Rash II* was one of many Mega Drive games that had been created in-house by EA.

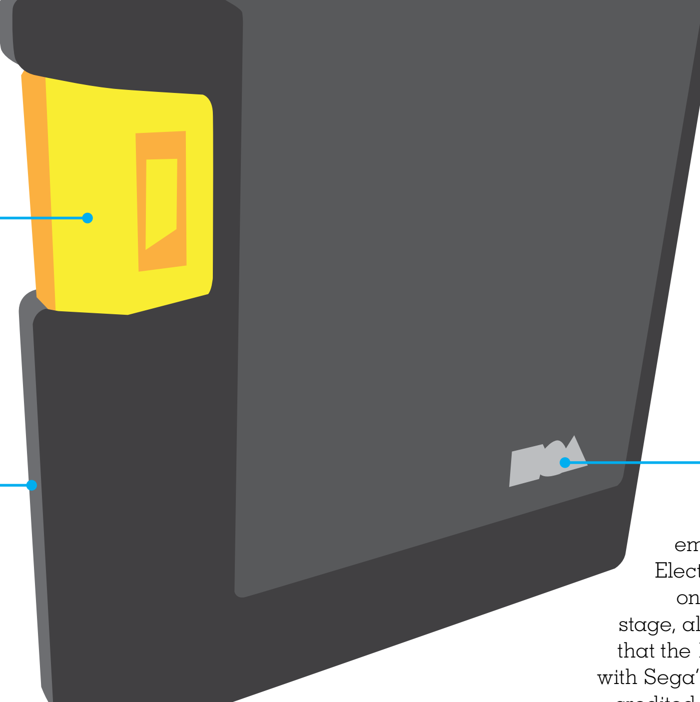
ART OF THE CART

HOW EA PHYSICALLY DISTINGUISHED ITS GAMES FROM THE OTHER MEGA DRIVE TITLES

YELLOW TAB
The yellow tab was purely cosmetic but it was a great brand marker, enabling gamers to instantly see that they were about to play a game published by Electronic Arts. EA was able to add this splash of colour because it manufactured its own cartridges. This gave it full control over releases.

SCREW THIS
As anyone who has tried to open a Mega Drive cartridge to have a poke around the insides will know, the screws used on the EA carts were different to those on the standard. There are actually entire forum threads out there which deal with the various ways of prising an EA cartridge open.

RIVAL CARTS
EA was not the only publisher to make its own Mega Drive carts. Konami, Capcom and Acclaim did too, although theirs resembled the standard cartridge, albeit with their logo and not Sega's on the back.



STANDING TALL
If you put an EA Mega Drive cart over the top of a standard one, you'd instantly see that Electronics Arts had made its media slightly taller. EA had designed its carts independently and it had intended to use them irrespective of whether Sega gave the nod or not. Differentiating the size of the cart would have avoided any Sega screams of being a copycat.

NO LOGO
You'll notice that the emphasis is very much on the Electronics Art logo rather than on Sega's. This put EA centre stage, although it does clearly state that the 16-bit cartridge was for use with Sega's console, while ensuring it credited the registered trademarks.

Hawkins made a crucial decision. EA would reverse-engineer the Mega Drive and carpet bomb the platform with its games. "We were going to leverage our experience and our software assets based on the Motorola 68000," he says. "We had used the workstations for development and built a lot of games on the Amiga and Atari ST and we had licensed games like *Marble Madness*, the coin-op hit that was made by Atari, and we had more than one game like that. This processor was a processor of choice in the arcades. It was going to be easy to migrate the code."

Everything was slotting into place for EA as it pondered its options in 1987. If the cartridge capacity could be big enough, it felt it had the makings of a good product line. But there were some hurdles with EA needing enough money not only for development but for the inevitable lawsuit and the production of cartridges. Hawkins sought to take EA public. He also started to focus more on EA's growth plans, leaving the day-to-day administration to his newly-hired senior vice president Kenneth Zerbe.

"I had heard the Sega Genesis would be launched in Japan in the Fall of 1988," Hawkins says. "Generally the Japanese model has always been, you launch in Japan in the Fall, then the next year the US, then Europe next year and the next year everywhere else. So I said as soon as it comes out in Japan in the Fall of 1988, we're going to Japan to buy some, bring them back home and start reverse engineering. Then when it comes out in the US in 1989, we'll study the US version to see if anything has been changed. If it hasn't, we're good to go. "

EA figured it could take a year to reverse engineer the Mega Drive, by which time, it would have a good idea of the ins and outs of the machine and be able to compare the Japanese and US versions to see if the coast was clear. "We were looking to release our first games in 1990 and be a couple of years ahead in the 16-bit console market than anyone else," he says. "This sort of thing had not been done before and it has not been done successfully since," Hawkins laughs.

The ultra-secret project was on. A machine was obtained from Japan as planned and it was brought to the US to be reverse-engineered. "There is tremendous heroism involved in a reverse-engineer job like this," Hawkins says. "You need a clean room – and that means having a hermetically-sealed room with no information or tools in it. You go in that room and you have this black box that you try to figure out. What you are going to end up doing is needing to look at copyrighted information in order to understand the black box and when you do that, you are making a copy. So you are going to take a debugger, hook up a Genesis, stick a game in it and run it and the debugger is going to peek at the code and you are going to study the code until you decipher and reverse-



■ *Lotus: The Ultimate Challenge* was published by EA on the Mega Drive as it looked around for the best home computer game licenses.

■ Already a major hit on the Commodore Amiga, *James Pond Underwater Agent* was easily ported across to the Mega Drive.



WORLDWIDE SALES FIGURES





MEGA DRIVE PC ENGINE

HOW EA COULD HAVE DECIDED TO BACK NEC'S MACHINE

Sega's new console wasn't the only machine launching at the time. NEC had produced the TurboGrafx-16 Entertainment SuperSystem, or PC Engine, which had an 8-bit CPU but a 16-bit video colour encoder and a 16-bit video display controller. It could display 482 colours on screen from a palette of 512.

But even though NEC had a lot of marketing dollars behind it and had become, at one point, the top-selling console in Japan, Trip Hawkins still believed Sega would win. "I thought, Sega is a pretty good software company and it made good first-party titles," Hawkins says. "I thought they'd know what game hardware features to have."

engineer what the machine had to be doing with those code statements."

The code that displayed on the screen via the debugger was an illegal copy but fair use laws provided a loophole. It had been established that the appearance of copyrighted source code in a debugger was fair use as long as the person looking at it didn't take advantage of the information later down the line. In other words, as long as those who were reverse-engineering the console didn't then go on to make a game for the Mega Drive, no law was deemed to have been broken.

"If Joe Smith is a games developer and he volunteers to go into that clean room, he cannot later write a game for that machine," explains Hawkins. "So this is heroism because the act of going into that room for several months, building tools from scratch and climbing Mount Everest is a very dark, lonely and desperate journey. It's like *Lord Of The Rings* – you're going to stick the ring in the volcano. And you're doing that knowing you are never going to make it home to what you do for a living which is make great games. You will have to watch all your colleagues make them instead."

The process was led by Steve Hayes and Jim Nitchals, and EA soon got what it needed. In the meantime, Sega had been courting third-party developers and publishers ahead of its expected US soft-launch in August 1989. Among those it sought to open talks with was EA but Hawkins was giving nothing away.

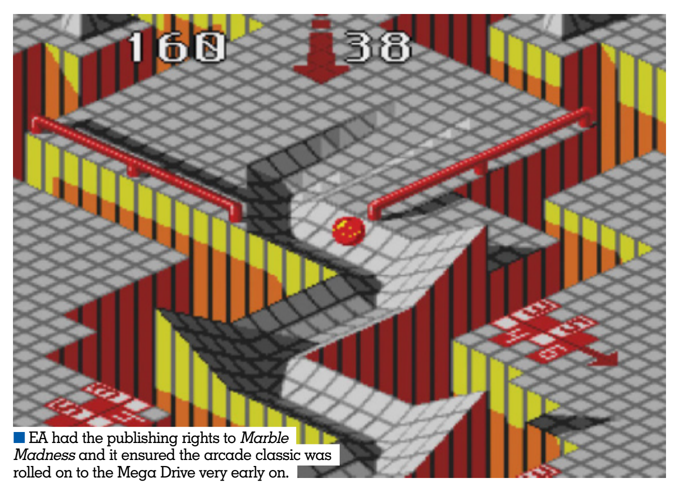
"They tried to convince me to make games for the Genesis and I literally spent a year talking to them periodically and maintained a front: I didn't want them to know what we were up to and it wasn't their business," he says. "I would candidly talk to them about my concerns and issues about them copying the Nintendo model and why I wasn't on Nintendo and why I wouldn't be on Sega under that kind of license agreement. But I said I liked their machine."

In each case, the response was the same. "They would chuckle and leave," Hawkins continues. "But EA was an important company so they would come back and try to talk me into it. I was just keeping them in a state of limbo because I wanted to make sure they would not be threatened or concerned by what we were doing."

EA was in a strong position. It knew the machine inside out and it had cash from going public. It wasn't aware of any patented technology and it had games such as *Bullfrog's Populous* and *John Madden Football*. It knew it could have the first games potentially up and running and relatively bug free by March 1990. But it was also time to come clean.

Hawkins had intended to announce what EA was doing in June 1990 but in the two months beforehand, the sales team was going to be calling around with details of the upcoming product line. "That's when I realised, ok, it was time for me as a good corporate citizen to go tell Sega what we're doing and to discuss with them whether or not it is possible to be partners or whether we're going to have to do this without them and have them need to be hostile to us," Hawkins says. "I was pretty sure I was wasting my time talking to them. I was pretty sure we would go to market without their support and that they would sue us, the lawsuit would go on for years and we would win."

Hawkins was clear. He laid out his own deal, told them he didn't need their intellectual property and that he'd reverse-engineered the Mega Drive. He said he



EA had the publishing rights to *Marble Madness* and it ensured the arcade classic was rolled on to the Mega Drive very early on.



As well as soccer and American football, basketball figured highly among the EA's sporting franchises.



Lacking strategy and adventure, *Risky Woods* could have felt like a gamble for EA at the time but it was confident enough to try.


The third game in EA's helicopter action franchise, *Urban Strike*, was released in 1994.

understood they wouldn't be able to sell games with Sega's seal of approval but that he wasn't fazed by that. EA intended to create packages that didn't suggest there was any Sega involvement. "We said if they wanted to go to court, we'd happily fight them for years," he adds. And their reaction?

"Like the big, bad wolf they tried to huff and puff and blow my house down," Hawkins said. "One of their arguments was that I was the CEO of a public company. They told me that they would announce we had infringed their intellectual property and that we were being sued. They said it would destroy our stock price. There was some back and forth over the next few weeks but the CES in Chicago was getting closer.

"We both knew that the cat would get out of the bag one way or the other so we started having a conversation. I said, 'hey I believe we can partner together and go shoulder-to-shoulder in the marketplace and fight Nintendo'. But it would take a completely different type of license agreement, one that would use their trademark which we would pay for but we wanted to control our own factory and make as many games as we want."

Sega began to agree. EA settled on a deal of a $2 per unit license fee and it was allowed to make its own cartridges. Since EA wanted to publish 20 titles in the first year, this was good news. "Sega's people were laughing, thinking it was the most ridiculous thing they had heard but we cranked it up and we shipped more. Sega was blown away."

"I WAS JUST KEEPING THEM IN A STATE OF LIMBO"
Trip Hawkins

Hawkins decided there would be a heavy emphasis on sports simulations including *John Madden Football* and *FIFA International Soccer* and that suited Sega, which needed unique selling points over Nintendo. But there was a sticking point: EA wanted a $2 million cap on the license fee. This shocked Sega, which threatened to call off the deal. It got to the point where even Hawkins' board members were urging he drop the demands.

"They said we have to sell a million units just to reach that," he recalls. "But I said, 'guys, this is one of the few occasions as the CEO that I'm going to make a decision that reflects the fact this is not a democracy and I'm going to get that cap'." He got the agreement within a week and EA went full speed ahead.

With a three-year lead on other publishers, EA became an important partner for Sega. Its prolific nature provided the volume of titles needed and the games became a major selling point for the console. EA repaid the faith by supporting the Mega Drive until 1997 which was way beyond all of the other major publishers. During that time, the Mega Drive sold 31 million units and smashed Nintendo's monopoly. As for that cap, well EA sold more than 20 million games, which meant it had saved EA around $40 million. It was the icing on the cake of a very canny set of circumstances.





EA went big on the Mega Drive, with huge adverts in the gaming press like the ones above.

THE RETRO GUIDE TO...

FROGGER

Join **games**™ as we cover 35 years of Konami's classic arcade licence with a quick hop, step and jump. Thank you, thank you, we'll be here all month

THEY SAY THE simplest concepts are the best and that was certainly true of Konami's *Frogger*. It was one of Konami's earliest arcade games, appearing in 1981, a few short years after the developer made its arcade debut with titles such as *Block Game* and *Space Ship*. Compared to some of Konami's earlier games, *Frogger* was a revelation. It featured smart, vibrant-looking visuals, a selection of popular Japanese tunes and tight, finely honed gameplay. It had universal appeal too, being nothing like the testosterone-fuelled shooters that Konami had been releasing up to that point.

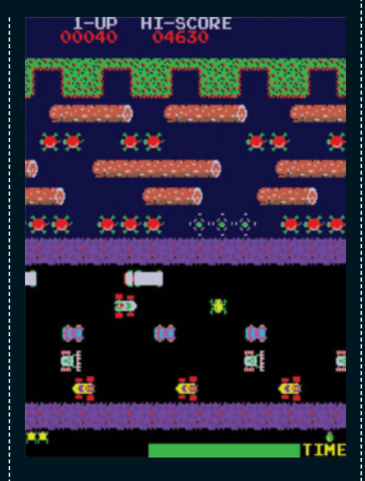
Released by Sega in the West, after the company licensed it from Konami, it became a big hit, going on to receive a number of official conversions and a whole host of copycat clones. Despite its success, Konami never released another *Frogger* arcade game, choosing instead to concentrate on the home market. Unlike many popular Konami franchises, *Frogger* was a relatively quiet series for the publisher and it wasn't until the release of the PlayStation that Konami started aggressively pushing the franchise on gamers.

Although some would be puzzle based, and others took the form of ropey *Zelda* clones, Konami never forget its frog's roots, either utilising the top-down viewpoint or fast-paced gameplay in its later games. The series has sold over 20 million units since 1981, suggesting there's plenty of life in the old frog yet.

FROGGER 1981

ARCADE, VARIOUS

Created in the golden age of videogames, Konami's *Frogger* rubbed shoulders with the likes of *Donkey Kong*, *Galaga* and Konami's own *Scramble*. Like the best arcade games, *Frogger*'s concept was simple, but incredibly effective: cross a busy road, a crocodile-infested lake and escape to the safety of your lily pad against a tight time limit. It's an idea so simple that anyone could play it – and they did, giving Konami one of its earliest hits and leading to countless clones. *Frogger*'s core gameplay was divided into two sections: the first saw you crossing an insanely busy road with different speed vehicles, while the next had you traversing a river where you had to use logs, disappearing turtles and even crocodiles to reach your goal. We'll finish with a fun musical fact: *Frogger*'s opening tune is a Japanese children's song called *Inu No Omawarisan*.





RIBBIT! 1991

ARCADE

This is a little tenuous, but we're allowing it as Sega was the publisher of the original game and it's clearly *Frogger* in all but name. *Ribbit!* was released ten years after *Frogger* and dutifully carried on Konami's froggy traditions. It spiced things up though by adding a competitive two-player mode and requiring you to catch a set amount of insects to complete each stage. The gameplay throughout is surprisingly varied, it had polished visuals that still hold up, and a large selection of classical tunes. Sadly, it never received a home release.





FROGGER II THREEEDEEP! 1984

VARIOUS

We've never understood why the titular character dies when he falls into water. It seems odd why this would happen – he is a bloody frog after all – but it happens in virtually every *Frogger* game that's ever been released. The first level of *Threeedeep!* actually lets you swim in water, you know, like a real, honest-to-goodness frog. You start off trying to dodge crocs and angry-looking fish to reach the top of the screen. The second screen apes the second half of the original *Frogger* and confines you to the backs of logs and various animals, but now you also have to deal with naff collision detection. The final stage is simple, bizarre and has you bouncing on clouds and jumping on the backs of birds and flying reptiles to reach your goal. In short, it's all a bit rubbish.

FROGGER 1997

PLAYSTATION

Goodness, it's the second page still and we're already on PlayStation games? Yup, for this is the period where *Frogger* truly came of age, with Konami releasing nearly 20 games in a ten-year period. This is one of our favourites as it's a classy update that stuck to the core *Frogger* principles, while adding plenty of neat new touches. Frogger now had 100 youngsters to rescue, and was able to access a variety of useful power-ups that genuinely enhanced the gameplay. Later levels introduced new mechanics like switches and exploding barrels, ensuring you were always kept on your webbed toes.





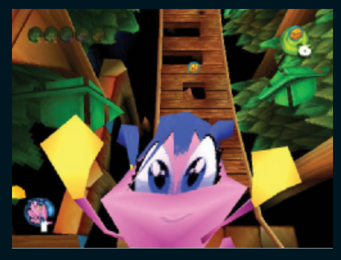


FROGGER 1998

SNES, GAME BOY COLOR

This incredibly crappy port of *Frogger* had the dubious honour of being the last officially released game on the Super Nintendo. Coincidentally, *Frogger* was also the last officially released game for Sega's Mega Drive, too. We're focusing on this version though, as it's extremely similar to the Game Boy Color release (which was also published by Majesco) and is completely rubbish. Everything about SNES *Frogger* was offensive back in 1998 and it's just as offensive today. The graphics were garish and poorly defined and do little to suggest they're from a 16-bit console in its twilight years; the controls were extremely stodgy and clunky, while the collision detection was extremely iffy throughout, making leaping and hitting your base incredibly tough to do. Christ, the ZX 81 port from 1981 was better than this turgid effort.





FROGGER 2: SWAMPY'S REVENGE 2001

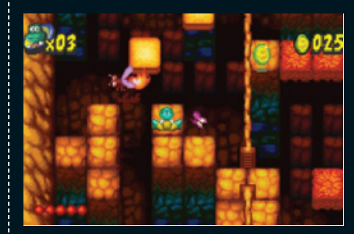
PLAYSTATION, PC, DREAMCAST

Perhaps the biggest issue with Blitz Studios' delightful follow-up to *Frogger* is that there's not really enough content in it. While it featured a port of the original arcade game and a fun four-player multiplayer mode, there were only 16 actual levels to play through. *Swampy's Revenge* is more linear than its predecessor, but that doesn't mean it's any less fun. Frogger's abilities were greatly enhanced to include moves like a double jump, his wife was introduced (although she has the same move set) and several other characters were playable, too. While there were still five baby frogs to collect on each level, there were also coins (that granted new VR-styled time-attack levels and characters if all 25 were collected) and a new variation on Frogger's croak ability that let you find otherwise hidden frogs. It's a very simple game, and it's clearly aimed at the younger gamer, but that doesn't stop *Swampy's Revenge* from being a surprising amount of fun. It's a pity the planned N64 game was cancelled.

FROGGER'S ADVENTURES: TEMPLE OF THE FROG 2001

GAME BOY ADVANCE

This was the first of several GBA-exclusive *Frogger* games that met with varying degrees of success. *Temple Of The Frog* is ostensibly a platformer at heart, spread across generic element-based worlds with a selection of medallions for Frogger to collect. It remains an exceptionally polished game with wonderfully responsive controls that allowed you to effortlessly traverse the highly dangerous environments in search of those precious medallions. It holds up well today too, and while it's extremely tough in places, it's never unfair, mimicking the pixel-perfect leaping of the arcade original. Just remember that if you want to reach the final world you'll need to find all 50 coins hidden throughout the previous ones.





"THE GREAT QUEST WAS EFFECTIVELY KONAMI'S ANSWER TO THE ZELDA SERIES"

FROGGER: THE GREAT QUEST 2002

PC, PLAYSTATION 2

Konami wasn't afraid to experiment with the *Frogger* franchise and as a result it shoehorned the green amphibian into a number of different genres. *The Great Quest* was effectively Konami's answer to the *Zelda* series. It was a pretty rubbish answer though, and even dressing Frogger up in clothes for the first time – like, you know, peoples – couldn't hide the fact that *The Great Quest* was anything but. Yes, there's a princess to rescue, and yes, Frogger now had some rather neat jump mechanics that let him gracefully glide around on his adventure, but that doesn't hide the fact that *The Great Quest* was let down by decidedly dodgy controls that seemingly had a mind of their own, responding to your touch only when they reluctantly feel like it. It's got a terrible 3D camera too, the kind that lazily follows the action like a lethargic rhino that's been shot in the arse by one tranquiliser too many. In fact, we had more enjoyment writing this than we had playing it again.



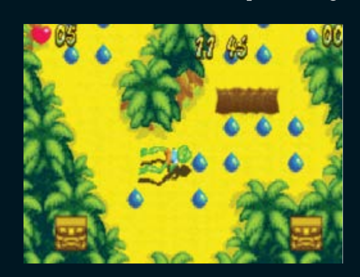


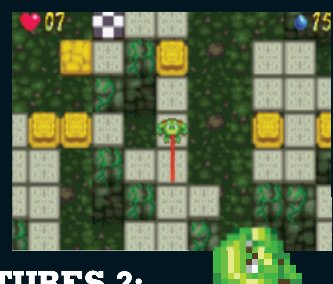
FROGGER ADVANCE: THE GREAT QUEST 2002

GAME BOY ADVANCE

Created by Vicarious Visions, this is an incredibly sorry effort that tried to reinvent *Frogger* as one of those cool anthropomorphised characters that was so popular in the early Nineties. Instead he's basically one of those awful anthropomorphised characters that were so popular during the Nineties. The concept behind *The Great Quest* is decent enough, but the implementation throughout is rather woeful.

For starters, Frogger's jumping is extremely inconsistent, meaning you don't always jump when you want to – quite critical for a game that relies on it. It's full of some of the most generic-looking locations to ever spill from the fevered mind of a game designer too, and it's topped off with the sort of frenzied item collecting that would have the creators of *Banjo-Tooie* jumping for joy. It's a painfully dull, generic-looking game, with ugly visuals and annoyingly twee music. In fact, *The Great Quest*'s one saving grace is that Frogger has suddenly realised he can actually swim, which at least adds to the variety. Oh and there's a character called Slick Willy, which we found childishly amusing.





FROGGER'S ADVENTURES 2: THE LOST WAND 2002

GAME BOY ADVANCE

2002

With a name like *The Lost Wand* you'd be forgiven for thinking that this is another *Zelda*-styled *Frogger* game. We'll forgive you though, because we're good like that.

This third *Frogger* GBA game might not have a proper Wikipedia entry, but that doesn't mean it's a game not worth bothering with, far from it. In fact it's a continuation of *Temple Of The Frog* – which, while we think about it, also sounds like an adventure game – continuing the same gameplay mechanics and tightly honed controls.

While it had some nice enhanced aesthetics, the biggest improvement over the original game was a selection of fun multiplayer modes, many of which could be played off a single cartridge. Race, a frantic dash through an obstacle-laden track is easily the best of the bunch, but they're all a lot of fun to play. Time trials have been included too, ensuring plenty of longevity.

FROGGER BEYOND 2002

VARIOUS

We like *Frogger Beyond*. We like it quite a lot. Yes it's frustratingly difficult in places, meaning the very kids it's aimed at are likely to cry when trying to complete certain stages, but we've heard that Frogger sustains himself on the salty tears of young children so that can only be a good thing in our book.

Frogger Beyond actually shared quite a lot in common with the *Frogger's Adventures* games, so it featured grid-based movement, you could change Frogger's direction with the L and R buttons and he had access to useful abilities like super-jumps, fast shoes and other useful items. There were animated cutscenes too, but they looked pretty terrible in 2002 and haven't really aged well today. The difficulty will certainly put some off, but the gameplay, which shares a lot in common with Hasbro's first PlayStation *Frogger* game, ensured that it captured all the fast-paced mechanics that made the original 1981 classic so much fun to play.





FROGGER'S ADVENTURES: THE RESCUE 2003

PC, PLAYSTATION 2, GAMECUBE

While it shared the same name with the earlier Game Boy Advance titles, *The Rescue* was notably different to its portable peers. Sure, it featured the same overhead, grid-based gameplay, and you'll still need fairly quick reactions, but *The Rescue* had far more puzzle elements than *Temple Of The Frog* and *The Lost Wand*. Levels were far less linear and often split up in areas, meaning there's far more exploration to do. The boss fights are a little clunkier than we'd like (dragging blocks and hitting switches can be a little hit and miss) but the *Mario Party*-inspired minigames are enjoyable enough.

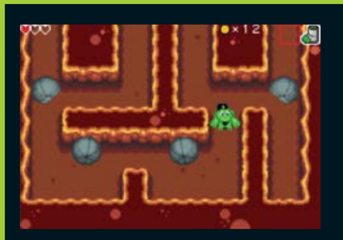




MORE FROGGER TO TRY

- FROGGER 1998, TIGER ELECTRONIC
- FROGGER PUZZLE 2005, MOBILE
- FROGGER'S 25TH ANNIVERSARY 2006, XBOX 360
- FROGGER 25TH: FROGGER EVOLUTION 2006, MOBILE
- FROGGER RETURNS 2009, PLAYSTATION 3, WII
- FROGGER INFERNO 2010, IOS
- FROGGER 2010, MOBILE







FROGGER'S JOURNEY: THE FORGOTTEN RELIC 2003

GAME BOY ADVANCE

After all those *Frogger* GBA games that sounded like they should be *Zelda* games, we finally received a proper *Zelda* clone in 2003 – and it was pants. While we don't have a problem with Konami basing Frogger on Indiana Jones (plenty of other videogame characters have been inspired by the iconic archaeologist), we do have a problem with Konami shoehorning Frogger into such a naff game. It all looks very nice of course, and the character designs hold up well, but the game was filled with bizarre baffling design choices. Why does our main man (frog) have a health bar for the first time ever? Why does Frogger have a grappling hook when he can jump with his long froggy legs? Why are we still playing?

FROGGER: ANCIENT SHADOW 2005

XBOX, PLAYSTATION 2, GAMECUBE

You wouldn't expect Hudson Soft to fumble a *Frogger* game so badly, but fumble it it did. The controls are complex and clunky, immediately at odds with the kids it is clearly aimed at. The perspective is tricky too, which makes it exceptionally hard to time jumps properly, while the puzzles are just plain poor. In fact, the only good thing we'll say about it is that it features (like several other *Frogger* games) an emulated version of the classic original.





FROGGER: HELMET CHAOS 2006

NINTENDO DS, PSP

Released at the same time as *Ancient Shadow*, *Helmet Chaos* was a far better take on *Frogger*. It featured the same type of puzzle-like gameplay found in *The Rescue*, but also throws in several other good ideas, as well as some genuinely enjoyable minigames (some of which vary depending on the system). While we'd argue that the PSP version has slightly better graphics and presentation, you have the play some minigames holding the console vertically, which can get a little tricky. We've always found the later *Frogger* games to be better suited to the portable format and that's also the case here. There's nothing really new on offer and it's certainly not as well put together as *The Rescue* is, but it's full of variety and always throws different gameplay mechanics at you. Plus it's miles more enjoyable than the awful *Ancient Shadow*.







MY FROGGER TOY TRIALS 2006

NINTENDO DS

There are some interesting ideas in *Toy Trials*, but not enough to make us want to revisit it anytime soon. Created to celebrate *Frogger*'s 25th anniversary, it's actually three games in one. There's an adventure bit where you control a young boy called Kyle, which is a bit rubbish, there's a top-down *Frogger* bit, which gives you a selection of amusing animal suits to wear, but it also a bit rubbish, and it's all rounded off with a selection of gimmicky minigames, which are also a bit rubbish. We did like the bit where we got attacked by Dance, Dance Revolution arrows. Oh wait, that was rubbish too.

THE CLONE WARS

FIVE FANTASTIC FROGGER RIP-OFFS



FREEWAY

ATARI 2600

This excellent arcade-style game by Activision's David Crane was created after Crane watched someone try to cross Lake Shore Drive on foot.



FROSTBITE

ATARI 2600

This was another *Frogger* clone from Activision. Frostbite Bailey must leap back and forth across ice floes in order to rebuild his igloo.



CAVEMAN

ZX SPECTRUM

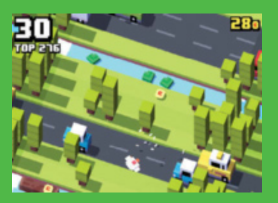
Incredibly tough game where you play a caveman trying to retrieve delicious eggs while avoiding lots of deadly dinosaurs.



HOPPER

BBC MICRO

The BBC Micro had some excellent arcade clones, so it should come as no surprise to discover this *Frogger* rip-off among them.



CROSSY ROAD

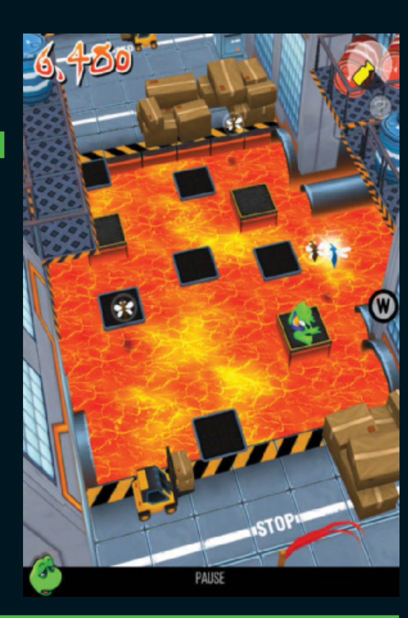
IOS

This excellent effort from Hipster Whale has already found huge success on mobile devices and turned *Frogger* into an endless runner.

FROGGER DECADES 2011

IOS

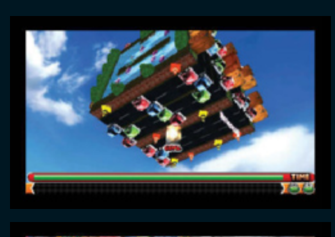
It's typical of Konami that the best *Frogger* game it released to celebrate *Frogger*'s 30th anniversary is no longer available to buy. Utilising a smart isometric viewpoint, *Decades* shares much in common with the likes of *Beyond* and *Swampy's Revenge*. The large amount of moves Frogger has access to means that you'd sometimes make a mistake, but luckily you had infinite lives and a large number of checkpoints to ease the pain.

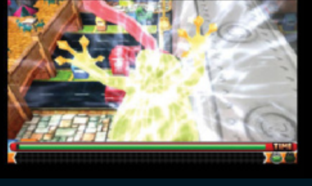


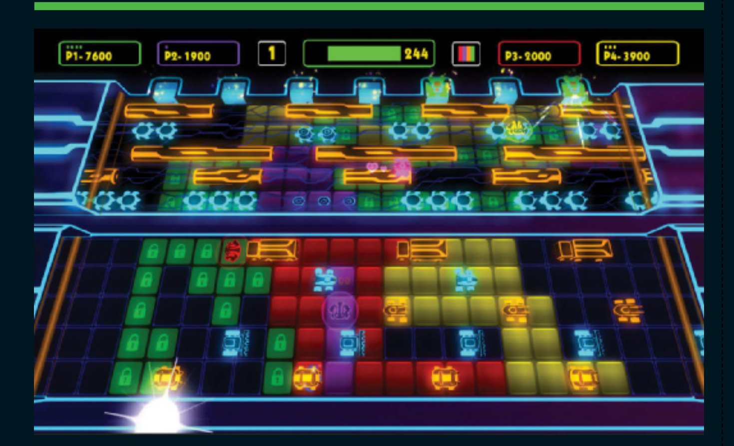
FROGGER 3D 2011

3DS

Frogger 3D was also released to commemorate *Frogger*'s 30th anniversary. It had some surprisingly good 3D effects and a stupid number of levels – 70, to be exact. What else? Oh, there were some fun multiplayer modes, frogs you could ride on, levels sometimes had multiple exits, and certain stages were set on rotating worlds that aped the planets found in *Super Mario Galaxy*. Did we mention it had an insane difficulty, too? We didn't? Damn.







FROGGER: HYPER ARCADE EDITION 2012

PS3, WII, XBOX 360

Remember when Namco gave *Pac-Man* a much-needed shot in the arm and created *Pac-Man Championship Edition*? Remember how good it was? Well Konami's attempt to try the same thing with *Frogger* wasn't anywhere near as successful. It certainly looks the part, with retro-looking *Tron*-inspired visuals, and Konami has at least come up with novel gameplay modes (you control two frogs at once in one) but it's just not as compelling to play as *Pac-Man* was. It's decent enough, but definitely a missed opportunity by Konami.

MATT HALL TALKS FROGGER

The Crossy Road developer discusses Konami's iconic game





What's your earliest memory of playing *Frogger*?

It was only once. I was eight [and] we had a dedicated system in the house. Before that, my exposure to videogames was in the fish-and-chip shop or in the videogame arcade while on holiday. For *Frogger* I remember the machine was located in the caravan park foyer where we used to stay in Robe, South Australia. We spent quite a lot of that holiday in the park and not at the beach.



What was it you liked about the mechanics?

Of all those early arcade games, it's the one that strikes me as having the broadest relatable theme. A frog crossing the road dodging traffic? Why not? The sound design was well above some of the other games of the time too. The jumping sound and the collections sounds are absolutely iconic.

Did you play any of the sequel games?

I seem to remember playing a conversion (or was it a clone) of *Frogger* on the Commodore 64. And we had looked at *Frogger Adventures* on the Game Boy Advance during my time in that era, but I felt it strayed too far from the simplicity of the original. I also wasn't a fan of the way *Frogger* was humanised into a Kermit-like form.

What elements of *Frogger* helped inspire *Crossy Road*?

After playing *Flappy Bird* I knew I wanted to make something which had similar "constant threat" as *Flappy*. I knew I wanted to make a one-tap game with immediate response, which could kill you right out of the gate. And I wanted to find a theme with broad appeal. It took about six months to realise that *Frogger* shared similar elements with *Flappy Bird* and that mixing *Frogger* with *Flappy Bird* would make for a really interesting design.

What other games inspired it?

I had been playing *Skylanders* a lot with my daughter. We were heading out to the store, seeing which new characters were out in the shops, and the disappointment when there was nothing new to buy that week!

I had also been playing a lot of *Disco Zoo* and loved the collection elements and fast pace of the puzzles in that game. I had also watched more advertising the weeks playing *Disco Zoo* than I had for years.

Have you been surprised by *Crossy Road*'s success?

About halfway through development of *Crossy Road* we knew we had developed something pretty special and had a good feeling. However it's eventual success was about ten times what we were hoping for. It's been really great to have finally developed a game that everyone knows. It's also opened a lot of doors for us, such as having given us the opportunity to develop *PAC-MAN 256*.

Why do you think *Frogger* is so fondly remembered?

Of those early arcade games, it's the most relatable to the real-world. You don't have to shoot aliens, jump fiery barrels or eat dots. You're just a frog, tryin' to get by in a world out to get you…



DEVELOPER COMMENTS

"Chris is either one of the nicest people in the industry, or he's an evil genius who will destroy us all. He's one of those slightly annoying people who are both extremely talented and exceptionally lovely. I've admired him as a player, a colleague, a fellow writer and a drinking buddy. Yup, definitely a master of the dark arts."

RHIANNA PRATCHETT

Avellone contributed mainly to the impressive DLC expansions for Obsidian's cracking Fallout game *New Vegas*.



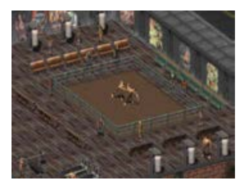
RETRO

INTERVIEW

CHRIS AVELLONE

Born and raised in the wilds of North Virginia, Avellone has become a leading videogame designer, writer and narrative expert over the last 20 years. **games™** caught up with him to discuss his entire career

SELECT GAMEOGRAPHY



Fallout 2 (1998) Designer



Planescape: Torment (1999) Lead Designer



Star Wars Knights Of The Old Republic 2: The Sith Lords (2004) Lead Designer

What was your first videogame experience?
Haunted House on the TRS-80 (4K). It was a text adventure game that was full of lies and deception and I rue playing it to this day. I got to the second to last level and no amount of verb or noun combination ever allowed me to prevail. It also turned me off enchanted swords forever.

Given your career has a strong background of storytelling and literature, did you study this at school?
Actually I went to the Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology, which saved me from ever thinking I was smart. I was at the bottom ten percent of the pile and it was like getting punched in the face by a bunch of smart kids, except not with fists, with grades, which turned out to hurt less, but hurt longer. After school, I dicked around mostly and took part-time jobs to earn a little cash. In almost all my spare time I wrote and submitted pen-and-paper modules for publication.

You were a fan of *Dungeons & Dragons*?
Initially, yes. The first campaigns (aside from The Keep On The Borderlands, which was a staple back then) were Cult Of The Reptile God and the huge mega-module Temple Of Elemental Evil, which went on for years without a resolution until the party vanished into one of the elemental nodes and we all collectively decided the elements could have the shittest campaign as far as we were concerned. After that, I put *D&D* away and moved onto *Superworld*, *Champions* and *Warhammer: Fantasy Role Play* to get my fix. But *D&D* was inspiring, mainly because it allowed for interactive story and the idea that it was a game of make-believe with rules was especially appealing.

I GOT TRADED FOR $300-WORTH OF SOFTWARE AS A REFERRAL BONUS WHEN MY EDITOR AT HERO GAMES GOT ME AN INTERVIEW AT INTERPLAY'S D&D DIVISION

So how exactly did you get into the videogame industry?
I got traded for $300-worth of software as a referral bonus when my editor at Hero Games got me an interview at Interplay's *D&D* division, Dragonplay. It was the first time – not the last – I felt like a prostitute and felt pretty dismal in terms of the circumstances. But I was working with games in franchises I loved, so it helped me sleep at night.

Were you interested in game design and coding as well as narrative?

I was happy to do anything related to games mastering. In my career I've often been overridden on anything except narrative so it's rarely been seen in any game I've worked on. Probably a good thing, but it would have been nice to at least gotten the opportunity to try other things. I did code BASIC for a time, but I wasn't great at it. They did compile, though, and they ran…sort of.

So what was your first major game over at Interplay?

Descent To Undermountain. I learned a lot about establishing roles and responsibilities and the importance of having the backing of those above you when it comes to making a title. Then I worked on *Fallout 2*, which unfortunately didn't have the same leadership or creative and design oversight as the first game, which I thought was one of the best and most innovative RPGs I'd ever played. I think the *Fallout* world suffered for this – along with the bugs, there was a large push to get it out of the door before it was ready. While I loved *Fallout 2*, I wish it'd been managed better overall.

Perhaps your most fondly recalled roles from this era were the ones in the Infinity engine games.

BioWare's to be commended on that engine. I'd argue that Black Isle couldn't have made most of their games without it, and that was proven again and again. Making an engine is difficult, and BioWare had done a good job.

While you did work on *Baldur's Gate* and *Icewind Dale*, your biggest role was with the intriguing *Planescape Torment*.

That's not a pretty story. Interplay had the *Planescape* license but didn't know what to do with it. They tried to make a PlayStation game with it but that didn't go anywhere, so all they had left was 'take the license, take the Infinity engine, make a game with half the people that normally work with this engine – GO!'. That said, I loved it. I got to write a story well in advance of the production period and iron out all the kinks. We had a small, passionate team and it seems to be a game that has stood the test of time and people enjoyed – I'm gratified that people seemed to respond to the themes and direction of the game, because I was certainly terrified they wouldn't and I would lose my job over it.

***Baldur's Gate Dark Alliance* was an action-orientated console departure for you – what was your role there?**

I did the story for *BGDA*. I'm proud of Snowblind's tech, but not the story, which was pushed and pulled a lot by my bosses.

INTERPLAY WAS IN BAD SHAPE FOR THE LAST FIVE YEARS. IT HAD MISSED THE CONSOLE EXPLOSION AND WAS TRYING TO CATCH UP

The scope of these story suggestions reached the point where I realised that doing a story early or finishing work early actually became a form of punishment because it became a target for the most mind-boggling iterations and suggestions ever. Anyway, the original story and scope never saw the light of day, and the final product felt anaemic and ultimately, rushed, even though ironically it was done much earlier than anything else. I'm glad the fundamental gameplay made up for where the story was lacking, and recognising my limitations, I knew I wasn't suited to be a lead designer on a console action-RPG, so recommended David Maldonado for the sequel.

In your own opinion, how did things start to go wrong at Interplay?

Interplay was in bad shape for the last five years. It had missed the console explosion and was trying to catch up, and the inability of Black Isle to create its own engine for most of the years of its existence definitely hurt the studio. Even trying to leverage other non-Infinity engines like Monolith didn't work and caused a number of titles such as *Torn* to be scrapped. That was a lot of years wasted and it kept happening, which didn't do much for morale. Overall, while games such as the *Icewind Dale* series helped generate revenue, there wasn't much new success once BioWare went away. Also, that series, while fun and a quick project, didn't do much to advance the RPG genre, so it felt like we were treading water, or rather, slowly drowning. Not fun times.

Things got even messier with *Baldur's Gate 3* and *Van Buren* (*Fallout 3*) and after the cancellation of the former you soon left Interplay. What happened?

While I was there, *Van Buren* hadn't gone much beyond the paper prototype, which was considerable on the area, system and story side. The reason for this was there was no staff, and even as a developer of one, I kept getting pulled off for *Lionheart* where my role wasn't very well-defined from Black Isle's end. When I left that, I thought I'd be free to work on *Van Buren*, but got drafted into *Baldur's Gate 3* pre-production work, which I didn't enjoy very much. After it was cancelled, I left and didn't have much exposure to what happened to *Van Buren* from then on, but I did keep my design thoughts close in case I could explore them again. But at that point, it became clear to me that no matter how hard the developers worked, we could lose it all in a second.

So, while I loved *Van Buren*, I left *Fallout* at Interplay and moved on, taking a brief stop to work with Snowblind again as a script doctor on *Champions Of Norrath*. And sure enough, within a year, *Van Buren* was cancelled, which I regret, but knew [that it] wasn't my or the other devs fault. My only other regret was that I should have realised from that brief stint freelancing with Snowblind that that could have proved a much better branch to pursue from that point on.

You then co-founded Obsidian with a number of ex-Black Isle employees – what were the first games you were involved with there?

I was lead designer on *Knights Of The Old Republic 2* and wrote almost all the companions for *Neverwinter Nights 2*. That was a pretty brutal death march. I wasn't actually a *Star Wars* fan, but I did become a



A group shot of the *Icewind Dale* development team with Chris Avellone far right.





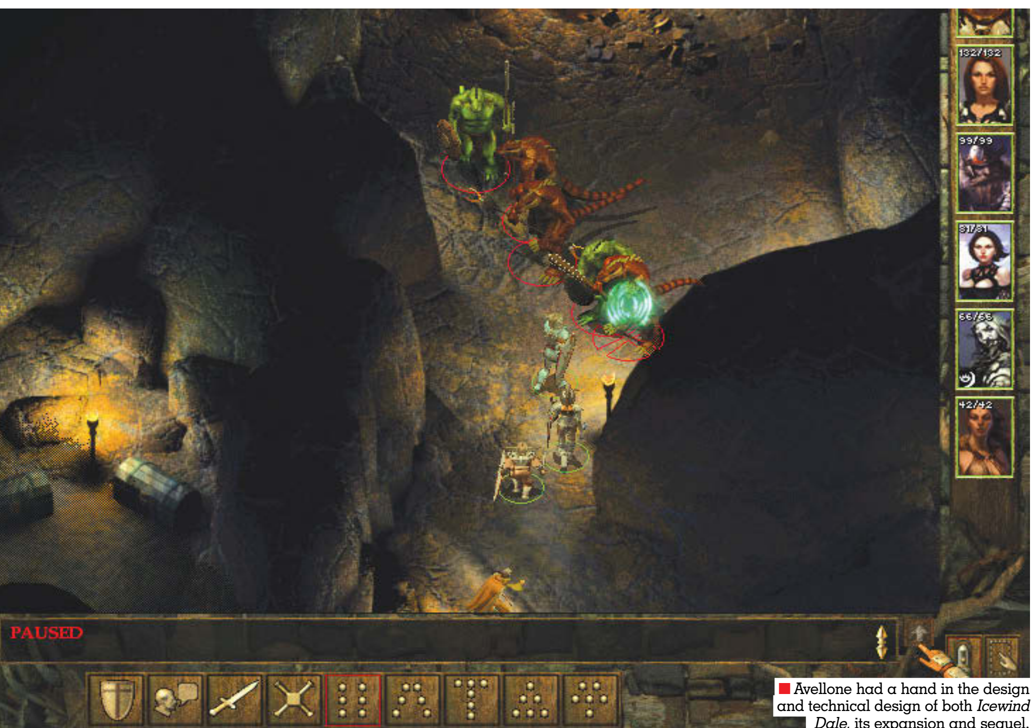
Another underrated game in Avellone's back catalogue: *Champions of Norrath.*



The underrated *Alpha Protocol* for which Avellone provided writing and narrative design, among other contributions.



One of Avellone's first gigs at Interplay: *Starfleet Academy.*



Avellone had a hand in the design and technical design of both *Icewind Dale*, its expansion and sequel.

fan of *KOTOR* and its universe, and grew to enjoy the possibilities of exploring *Star Wars* outside the realm of the 'modern' universe. I also got the opportunity to do a few *Star Wars* short scripts and, even better, write short comic bursts for *Star Wars: Clone Wars Adventures*. It was my first foray into comics but my editor at Dark Horse, Dave Marshall, was very generous with his time and showed a lot of patience. I'm forever grateful to him.

Probably Obsidian's most notable game of this period was *Fallout New Vegas*.

It was great to get back into the *Fallout* world and incorporate some of the *Van Buren* elements I'd spent years designing back at Interplay such as locations, factions, tech and even the Night Kin's psychosis. I really enjoyed working on it, especially the DLCs.

You left Obsidian in June of last year (2015). Why the move?

I liked Swen [Vincke, Larian Studios founder], I liked *Divinity: Original Sin 2*'s inter-party agenda and mechanics, I liked its dungeon exploration and like their writers. I'd reached the point where I was looking for some management support and trust, and Larian provided that. It was weird to bring up design elements and be listened to – they didn't agree to everything, but at least they listened, and that's enough for me. Today I'm working on *Divinity: Original Sin 2* and I can't say what else – hopefully soon, so stay tuned!

What are your personal best moments?

The first time I did a stint as producer which was on *South Park*, and the gratification that came with fixing the animation cut scene pipeline. Also, the months after the release of *Planescape Torment*, and in the current day, the number of people who enjoyed the game we worked on, and those who have been inspired to go make their own games.

How has the role of games designer changed over the years?

It's become more specialised. When I got into the industry, there wasn't even such a thing as games designer, and now there's tons of designers: system, level, narrative, all organised in a hierarchy or else it can become a bit of a mess.

What advice would you give to potential games designers?

Nothing's stopping you from making mods or games right now – so do it. Between public game engines and digital distribution, there's nothing much in the way anymore except your own motivation, so stop being a potential and be an actual. If anyone wants more specific advice for RPGs, I'm always happy to help if I can: drop me a line on twitter @chrisavellone and I'll do what I can.

The original American localisation removed all reference to alcohol, though your character could still get intoxicated on special 'juice'. It is ill advised; nobody should farm with a hangover.

GAME CHANGERS

HARVEST MOON

Released: 9 August 1996 **Publisher:** Natsume **Developer:** Amccus **System:** SNES

Every month **games™** looks back at some of the most influential and original games of all time. This month we dive into Harvest Moon, the game that made farming feel like play

BY THEIR VERY nature, videogames are an exercise in escapism. They sweep us away from the trauma of the nine-to-five and can deliver us to worlds unseen. They engage us in heroic fantasies and allow us to explore beyond the boundaries of space and time. A good game can present a brand of immersive freedom that is very difficult to derive from any other form of entertainment. And yet, here we are, forgoing sleep to till soil, watching the digital sun set on another hard day in the turnip fields.

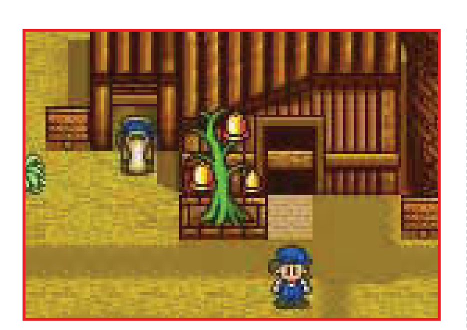
There's something spectacular about the way in which *Harvest Moon* can turn even the most tedious acts into pleasurable activities. The SNES classic is still as enjoyable to this day as it was back in 1996; its accessibility and endearing 16-bit aesthetic have made it impossibly impervious to the destructive tendencies of time.

It's rare that a game from the days of retro-past can hold up so sublimely on something more than nostalgia value alone. *Harvest Moon* might not have been the first game to make play out of work, but it unearthed a recipe to success that helped establish it as one of the most prolific franchises in the industry.

On paper there's very little about a farming simulator that sounds appealing. By its nature, the gameplay is built around an approximation of real-world chores: sowing seeds, repairing fences, milking cows and harvesting crops. If that doesn't sound like a great use of your time, that's because it shouldn't be. But here we are, almost two decades later, still enthralled by it. *Harvest Moon* maintains a level of engagement that keeps the player involved, and it all begins with an irresponsible father figure.

TIPS AND TRICKS

LITTLE KNOWN SECRETS TO HELP IMPROVE PRODUCTIVITY



THE MONEY TREE

★ Don't listen to Hawker; money doesn't grow on trees. What 20,000G will get you, however, is a tree with a bell on it. It's a handy item that gets all of your animals inside automatically at night. It saves you so much time, and time is money in *Harvest Moon*.



DOG WATCHER

★ We understand that you want to keep your adorable dog inside the house with you, away from the elements. But if you leave it outside at night your fences will never break – unless it snows or rains, of course, as the dog will creep back inside the house.



WEATHER REPORT

★ Every morning you'll have the option of hearing a weather report. This is useful as it can change the plan of days. Rain negates hours spent watering plants, while storms could signal a need to leave animals inside; nobody likes seeing chickens get blown away.

■■■ After being abandoned at the family farm – the chicken coop, farmhouse and surrounding fields fallen into total disrepair – you're given just two and a half years to restore it to its former glory and (perhaps most importantly) prove yourself. Typically, your first few seasons will be rough as you attempt to get your head around the emerging systems without letting everything wither around you. But eventually *Harvest Moon* just clicks. You'll find yourself expertly budgeting resources, crops and time; working tirelessly to expand your farmland to survive the harsh winter and barren summer seasons.

You find your rhythm by pushing against its boundaries. You could try and stay up all night ripping weeds out of the ground if you wanted to, but you'll eventually become exhausted, putting the next day at risk as your stamina fails to recover – and you often discover this the hard way. Crop growth will stunt if you fail to water them daily, animals will stop producing the goods if you don't care for them and – if you're really unlucky – natural disasters such as hurricanes and earthquakes can set you back weeks.

IT'S RARE THAT A GAME FROM THE DAYS OF RETRO-PAST CAN HOLD UP SO SUBLIMELY ON SOMETHING MORE THAN NOSTALGIA VALUE ALONE

KEY FACTS

■ There have been over 17 new *Harvest Moon* games for Nintendo and Sony consoles since 1996, as well as a handful of remakes and reissues. It's proven to be a hugely popular franchise, its appeal seemingly never wavering.

■ There are over 20 endings in *Harvest Moon*, and many of them are dependent on seeing all the weird and wonderful things that the game has to offer. From befriending a dog, to finding secret fairies after disasters to ultimately finding a wife and having a ream of kids.

In many respects, it's easy to be betrayed by *Harvest Moon*'s implied simplicity. There's a surprising depth to its systems, and that's part of its long-lasting appeal. Even the simple act of raising a healthy crop involves clearing the land of debris, using a hoe to prepare the soil, planting a batch of fresh seeds and then watering them daily. This needs to be repeated for every type of vegetable you may need for the harvest, and it'll take several days before your efforts bear any results. That may sound tedious, but the reward and value of *Harvest Moon* comes as you find your rhythm between these basic activities, caring for your livestock and enjoying a social life in the nearby village. By going through these motions you feel more connected to everything that you produce, proud of how quickly you can do them before moving on to other tasks. Eventually though, the game opens up, giving you the space and freedom to chose your own path, and that's where it really springs to life.

By the end of the simulated two and a half years, your returning father judges everything that you have achieved. He'll either dish out praise for restoring the farm to a picture of pristine productivity or you'll be admonished for spending your time chasing love, fishing in the sun and generally ignoring your birthright by exploring the lush mountainous countryside. Following your passions in *Harvest Moon* leads to a combination of 20 different endings, and it helps to wrap the entire experience up in a personal and relatable fashion; the hardships and time spent feel worth it in the end.

Ultimately, *Harvest Moon* was designed as escapism for producer Yasuhiro Wada. It was his dream to create a non-violent RPG built around his fond childhood memories of being out in the countryside, and that fantasy continues to delight players to this day. The original *Harvest Moon* spawned a franchise that's still active, still surprising and it's because the core competencies established in this SNES classic still play beautifully to this day.



GAME CHANGERS

EIGHT WAYS TO BECOME A BETTER FARMER

GETTING THE 'BEST' ENDING ON HARVEST MOON IS NO WALK IN THE PARK



HUG YOUR DOG

■ At the beginning of the game, as soon as you take over the farm from your father, you'll adopt a friendly dog. Ultimately, it'll look after itself – it doesn't require feeding or grooming like the other animals – but you'll want to take care of it if you want to get the best ending. Hugging your dog will raise your happiness. Do it over a 100 times to achieve greatness.



UPGRADE YOUR TOOLS

■ If you want any chance of fixing your farm, you'll need the best tools available. The basic tools will get the job done to an extent, but if you want to pull in a great harvest you'll want to upgrade your axe, hoe, hammer sickle, and watering can as quickly as possible. They allow you to work across a bigger area, not to mention putting less strain on your stamina.



BE MINDFUL OF SEASONS

Vegetables you can farm change depending on the season, which changes every 30 days in game. You're free to grow whatever you want in spring and summer, but during autumn the only things that grow are two variations of mushroom – one poisonous, the other is not. Winter is worse, as you'll be left to survive on herbs in the forest cave and your stores.



MANAGING INCOME

It's important to balance work and play, particularly in spring and summer. The bigger the harvest, the more you can squirrel away into the storage, and the more consistent your income will be as the barren winter approaches. Income is important for expanding your farm, repairing broken fences, buying new seeds, more animals and upgrading items.



BUY ANIMALS WISELY

To be happy in *Harvest Moon*, you need to own at least one cow and chicken, though you also need 10,000G in your possession. You don't get that sort of cash with turnips! Chickens produce eggs that can be sold – or hatched, should you wish to grow your roost. Cows produce great quantities of milk, so resist selling them to vendors for instant gain.



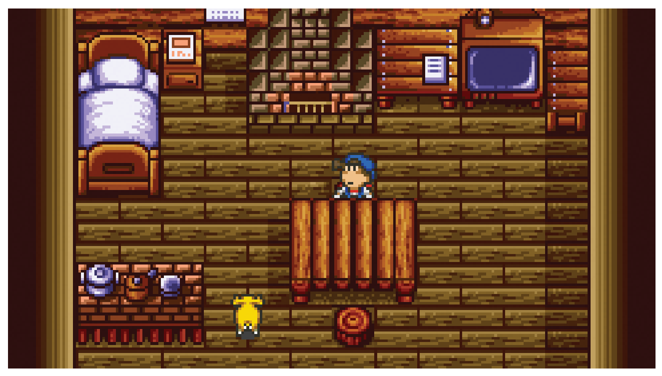
BE WARY OF COWS

Cows can destroy your farm in *Harvest Moon*. Not only do they require daily conversation, brushing and feeding, but if you make the mistake of purchasing a Miracle Potion, which will make the cow pregnant, you'll essentially be without its produce for a full 21 days. It just isn't worth the hassle or money. Instead, look to purchase a calf outright.



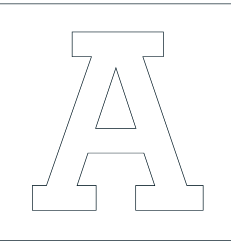
GET MARRIED

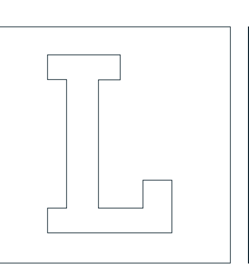
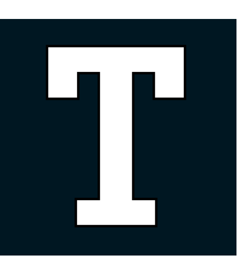
One of *Harvest Moon*'s side-quests is finding love. It's also integral to increasing your happiness and securing that picture-perfect ending. There are many suitors, and you'll need to gain their affection. As courtship develops you'll need to fulfil specific requirements and complete events before you can eventually purchase a blue feather for proposal.



MARRIAGE IS HARD

That best ending also requires your family to include two children – no easy task. For starters, happiness and the heart gauge needs to be through the roof – remember, if you stay out of the house farming past 6pm you'll lose a few affection points. You'll also need enough cash to expand your house, buy a double bed and keep your farm clean.



VIVE

MANUFACTURER: **HTC** PRICE: **£689**

PERHAPS THE BIGGEST success of the HTC Vive is that it lays to rest any concerns about virtual reality's ability to truly amaze and immerse. Thanks to a combination of some of the best visual fidelity yet seen from a virtual-reality headset and the unparalleled tactility that is afforded by using two motion-control remotes, playing games with the HTC Vive is a very special experience.

Thanks to the two sensors placed in the corner of you room, wherever you choose to set them up, you have some pretty amazing tracking of both the remotes in your hands and your head. Setting up the Vive can be tricky at first as you need to either screw the sensors into your walls or find something to place them on. However, once that particular hurdle has been vaulted, the rest of the process is relatively simple and the walkthrough provided by the software is easy to follow.

The hardware itself is rather well built. The matte finish on the headset and controllers brings to mind the build quality of the Xbox One controllers. They are definitely a step up from Valve's own Steam Controllers. The headset is a little on the heavy side, but comfortable with adjustable straps and smartly designed foam lining around the eyes that mean you can use the Vive while still wearing glasses.

Ultimately, though, the Vive is an expensive piece of kit for a limited games lineup at present and it requires a powerful PC to run. If you already have a high-end gaming PC, then perhaps you'll be more inclined to join the VR revolution. All that said, while the moment-to-moment experience is excellent, it still feels like visual fidelity could be improved with time. Graphically, most games are rendering a little behind current generational standards, while keeping framerates high. If you only want the best graphics, you may want to wait a little longer.

VERDICT 8/10



GAMING CLOTHING



THE GOLDEN MASK

A smart design inspired by Deus Ex, this golden mask ties together the beautiful art design of Eidos Montreal's game with the decadent lifestyles of some of the universe's richer inhabitants.
www.musterbrand.com



DROWNER

While *The Witcher 3*'s Drowners wouldn't have been our first choice of subject when putting together a shirt, we can't argue that this isn't a very cool piece of artwork.
www.musterbrand.com



PLAYSTATION FIVE MORE MINUTES

It's the motto of the truly addicted gamer, when you find just the right title (*Rocket League* perhaps?) that you just don't want to walk away from. You need that next fix and, five more minutes is all it will take.
www.thinkgeek.com



GAMEVICE CONTROLLER

SOLD BY: **GAMEVICE** PRICE: **£79.95**

AS A SMALLER incarnation of the original iPad device, the iPhone Gamevice appears to carry many of the same strengths. It works under its own battery power, which may or may not bother you so long as you keep it charged. It's compact thanks to the fact it can fold down, which makes it more portable than the iPad version. Stick resistance is good, as is the button feel. The small size means the triggers are a little close, and it's pricey, but well built.
www.apple.com/uk/



PHONEJOY GAMEPAD 2

SOLD BY: **PHONEJOY** PRICE: **$69.90**

THIS IS ANOTHER controller that has seen some improvements from a previous model with more pronounced analogue sticks making it a much more enjoyable gamepad to use. Compatibility with iOS and Android as well as an adjustable extension between the left and right parts of the controller make it very versatile, and rubber grips mean it should always be secure. In fact, it can be used as a Bluetooth controller even when its two halves are connected together. 14 hours of battery life gives it plenty of practical gaming time too.
www.phonejoy.com

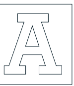


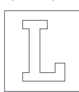
8BITDO ZERO GAMEPAD

SOLD BY: **8BITDO** PRICE: **£14.99**

THE FIRST THING you have to say about this device is that it's clearly very compact. In fact, it is claimed that this is the smallest bluetooth controller you can find. What's more, it's not half bad. The build quality is good, especially given the low price point, and it's compatible with iOS, Android and Windows. It may ultimately be a little too small for larger hands (if you ever struggled with a Game Boy Micro, you may not want to bother).
www.techinthebasket.com










MINECRAFT: SURVIVORS' BOOK OF SECRETS

PUBLISHER: **EGMONT**

THE LATEST IN the official line of *Minecraft* books published in association with Mojang itself, *The Survivors' Book Of Secrets* is a little different to the other titles that have appeared so far. While those have been relatively engaging, but largely practical guides to crafting, fighting and working with redstone, this is a more lighthearted take on the *Minecraft* experience.

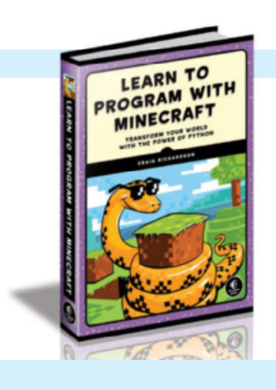
This book is said to be brought to us by an underground group known as the Survivors, who have been mastering *Minecraft* since its earliest Alpha days. The Chief is our guide through their accumulated knowledge, all brought together in a nicely bound and classy hardback book, at a pretty reasonable £5.99.

The price is achieved by some slightly lower quality paper than you'll find in Egmont's main series of *Minecraft* guides and some printing choices that also save money – namely that it's entirely in black and white without any in-game screens. But that's okay, because in their place are a series of really quite excellent sketches that serve the purpose of guiding players through the pros and cons of base design, inventory management and planning recon missions. It's a combination that turns what might have been seen as a cut-price or budget book into something really quite enjoyable on its own terms. The writing is as concise and clear as ever, the help very practical and the whole thing is packaged in a very engaging way.

If you've already got *Minecraft* books piled high or find you know all you need from online resources, then this might not give you much more, but those making a start in *Minecraft* or looking to venture out into the survival side of the game after hours spent in Creative might want to give it a look. It will definitely set you on the right path.

www.amazon.co.uk

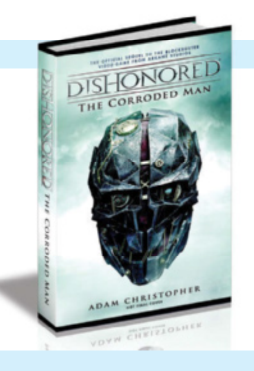
VERDICT **8**/10



LEARN TO PROGRAM WITH MINECRAFT

Many have seen *Minecraft* as a great tool for teaching kids about the basics of coding, not least because of its use of redstone. This book offers a guided experience working within Mojang's game to teach some basic programming ideas. Seems like a fantastic idea to us.

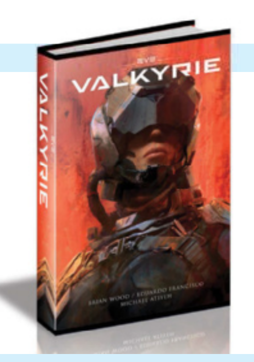
www.thinkgeek.com



DISHONORED: THE CORRODED MAN

Set ten years after the events of *Dishonored* and five years before *Dishonored 2*, this book offers a look at an adventure for a younger Emily Kaldwin and her father, Corvo Attano, as they attempt to protect her throne from attack. It's a fascinating new mystery and expansion of Dunwall lore.

www.titanbooks.com



EVE: VALKYRIE

Telling the story that leads into CCP's VR experience, this collection of the *EVE: Valkyrie* comics from Dark Horse takes a closer look at the 'immortal' Valkyrie, pilots whose minds are transferred to clone bodies upon death so that they may never die. It's another rich addition to EVE history.

www.darkhorse.com



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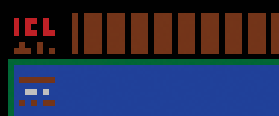












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